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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

July  
1993

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**Terry Bisson**  
and others

**Greg Egan**  
interview





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Brighton BN1 6FL, United Kingdom.  
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general correspondence, books for  
review, and enquiries about  
advertising should be sent to this  
address.

**Subscriptions:** £28 for one year (12  
issues) in the UK. Cheques or postal  
orders should be crossed and made  
payable to *Interzone*. Overseas  
subscriptions are £34, payable by  
International Money Order.  
Payments may also be made by  
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£340 (overseas); \$520 (U.S.  
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# interzone

## SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

**No 73****July 1993**

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## Cover by Mark Harrison

Published monthly.

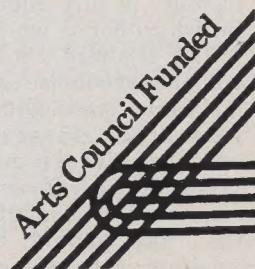
All material is © *Interzone*, 1993**ISSN 0264-3596**

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution through Diamond Magazine  
Distribution Ltd., Unit 1,  
Burgess Rd., Ivyhouse Lane,  
Hastings, E. Sussex TN35 4NR  
(tel. 0424 430422)

Bookshop distribution through Central Books,  
99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN  
(tel. 081 896 4854)

U.S. and Canadian distribution through Worldwide  
Magazine Distributors Ltd., Unit 14 – 225 Bysham  
Park Drive, Woodstock, Ontario N4T 1P1,  
Canada (tel. 519 539 0200) – both trade  
and individual queries welcomed.





# Interaction

**Editor's Note:** The recently-announced winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best sf novel published in Britain in 1992 was Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* (Michael Joseph/Penguin). The choice of winner has already aroused some controversy – see David Langford's report on page 39 of this issue. Now past-winner Colin Greenland has sent us a letter adding his voice to the debate.

Dear Editors:

So Arthur Clarke is giving Marge Piercy a thousand pounds. I must admit it is hard to see why.

The judges have done nothing wrong, there's no point in berating them, or the institution of the Clarke Award itself. Their job is to agree each year on the best sf novel published in Britain, without condition or qualification, and that's what they've done. The problem is, an award is not just a reward: it's a decoration; literally, an honour.

An award doesn't just belong to the author it's given to. It belongs to the person who provided it, whose name is on it. It belongs to the publishers, who must make the best use they can of it. It belongs to the booksellers, who may choose to give it prominence among their proliferating heaps of undifferentiated stock. And more than all of these, it belongs to the people on whose behalf it is given, the ones who recognize it and give it its value, and all the others whose attention they hope to attract by means of it.

I haven't read *Body of Glass*, and wouldn't dream of contesting the decision. Nor do I in any way begrudge Piercy her prize. I hope she will treasure it as much as I treasure mine. But insofar as there really is an sf community in these isles, made up of people with common interests and fellow feeling, we must all suspect that this year the Clarke Award has gone to an author who doesn't need it (or the money that comes with it), who will gain no benefit from the association with the name of her benefactor – at a publisher who will have no use for it; on behalf of a community that doesn't approve it; while the booksellers and the public will not even notice it. Surely we must all regret the recurring inability of jury after jury to find a British author on whom to bestow the British sf award, set up by a British author to encourage and promote sf in his native land. And this at a time when British sf is as rich and diverse and vital as it has ever been!

I'm not of a sufficiently legalistic or pedantic cast of mind to dictate how the rules should be framed, to privilege nationals or residents or

countries of first publication. All I say is that I shall feel reassured about this year's decision only when it has been so loudly and univocally deplored that the terms are revised, to reclaim the 1993 Arthur C. Clarke Award before it loses its point and its credibility, and to turn it into what, correct me if I'm wrong, Arthur meant it to be in the first place: an annual award for the best British sf novel.

Yours in hope,

**Colin Greenland**

*Harrow, Middlesex*

Dear Editors:

I kept meaning to write to you concerning David Pringle's comments in the issue 70 letters column – and then I found that I'd delayed so long that issue 71 appeared. Sorry for the datedness of this reaction, but some things in 71 suggest that it's still relevant.

Yes, David's right, there are two different issues arising here, but then, he hasn't got to grips with either of them. Firstly, there's the accusation that you value a big name on a story above good content – that you publish famous writers solely because they are famous. Every major fiction magazine gets accused of this, every editor denies it – and (almost) every one of them does it, so blatantly that denials just make them look stupid. (Perhaps some of them genuinely delude themselves, once they've seen where a submission comes from.) On this basis, the Bob Shaw special issue at least scores points for honesty, although I have to say that I found the contents pretty disappointing by Shaw's (often high) standards. However, as every editor around finds it commercially necessary to behave in this way, I'd say there was no real need to attack *Interzone*, which is far from the worst offender.

And I'd have to guess that the infamous Aldiss "Horse Meat" was not published as a cynical commercial manoeuvre – or if it was, you're feeling pretty silly now, with subscriptions lost for it. Yes, it was skilfully, powerfully written; no, "entertainment" shouldn't be the sole criterion for the decision as to whether to publish stories; but if a piece of writing is structured as fantasy, and so says nothing effective about the real world (and this one certainly failed on that score – see other letters), while being too blunt to change attitudes, and too brutal to entertain – *what is the point of it?* After reading Aldiss's and your comments on the subject, I'm left with the suspicion that people who spend their lives working with fiction get lost in the closed world of writing, and forget that "outsiders" have a different set of priorities.

Perhaps that sounds like a vapid plea for the bitter pill to be coated with sugar; perhaps it is. However, if writing that does nothing but entertain is empty and pointless, writing that refuses to entertain is just *dead*, although it may twitch for a while. (And I bet some people will love *that* metaphor.)

The popularity poll votes in favour of "Horse Meat" suggest that some readers do want this sort of thing in the magazine, and I can't quite say that my dislike of it was sufficient to make me wish for censorship. However, what these people presumably want – and what the story constituted – was something closer to horror than "Science Fiction and Fantasy," which is what your cover promises. Well, okay, there's an overlap, and you'd have a pretty anodyne magazine if you rejected every submission with horrific elements – but in the end, there's also a difference, and you've really got to decide which market you want. Horror is a popular genre, and the bookshops are hardly short of it; good sf and fantasy are a little scarcer. As a lover of sf, I'd be sorry to see you move the other way, and lose my subscription – but you'd evidently keep those other people, so why should you care?

If you want to know where I'd tell you to place the "limits of decorum," tough; that's your job, and we all know that they have to be mobile. But if you find yourselves pushing them outwards a few miles, do ask yourselves *why*. Does the "indecorous" story achieve anything worthwhile? Or are you only publishing it because it's written competently (not a virtue in itself), or because it has a famous name attached?

By the way, congratulations on number 71 – one of your better issues for some time. Well, I'm a little uncertain about the sexual politics of the Jonathan Lethem piece, but I imagine that he enjoyed writing it. William Barton's "Slowly Comes a Hungry People" was both intelligent and ingenious; I'm a bit uncertain about both the punchline and the level of conceptualization displayed by the hominids in the story, but as a cool, powerful, insidious study of the human capacity for inhumanity, it left poor old Brian Aldiss trailing.

**Phil Masters**

*Baldock, Herts.*

Dear Editors:

I'm afraid I must add my voice to those who have objected to Brian Aldiss's "Horse Meat." I felt rather sickened, especially since he was one of the writers who really "turned me on" to science fiction in the early 1970s. So –



part of my sick feeling was disillusionment, the other part was just...sickness at gratuitous sex/violence. There's enough of it in the world (and especially this corner of it) not to need further confrontation with it in a "literary" magazine.

While not disputing his writing was intense and has lost none of its technical brilliance, I do feel there was something far more disturbingly absent. It had something to do with an almost dispassionate detachment from his characters – it was as if he didn't care what happened to them. And that also meant I did not really engage with the story – only on an abstract level of outrage at human representatives abusing and being abused. But we all know that this happens, in any case. Where is the sense of revelation, that (for me) is an important component of a good story?

"Downbeat" has nothing to do with it. Samuel Beckett has written "downbeat" stories which I've really enjoyed. It comes through in his stories that even if the cosmos doesn't care for his characters, at least he does. And that seems to be the disturbing deficit in Mr Aldiss's story.

Yes, disturbing stories that challenge should be published in *Interzone*. But Mr Aldiss's story did not challenge or disturb – it merely sickened me. If I was so inclined, it may be just as effective to stop and leer at a gruesome road accident. But because being human means something more to me than that, I generally prefer to read *Interzone*.

**Nick Wood**

Cape Town, South Africa

Dear Editors:

The fiction highlight of 1993 so far has to be Astrid Julian's "Irene's Song." It's interesting that this story should have been published hot on the heels of the "Horse Meat" controversy. Brian Aldiss stated in his defence of his story that it "...comments on what is happening now in Jugoslavia..." "Irene's Song" is a far more eloquent comment.

On this subject, you asked in *Interzone* 70 for readers' opinions on your editorial policy regarding the publication of "dangerous" material. I would say the policy you currently have is fine. I'd rather see a rumpus over a story in your "Interaction" column than think you were shying away from publishing quality fiction because it might provoke an unfavourable reaction. I am certain that the editors of *IZ* would not deliberately publish pornography – equally I am certain that nothing I have ever read in *IZ* (including "Horse Meat") has ever been a deliberately crafted piece of pornography. I'm satisfied that whenever a story is as upsetting and shocking as was "Horse Meat" its intent goes beyond outraging or titillating the reader – sometimes the intent may be

lost in the narrative, but this can be equally true of the "tamest" story. Any story becomes difficult to read, for whatever reason, if it wanders from, and misses, its point.

I agree entirely with David Pringle's comment in *IZ* 70 that *sf* should be more than "mere entertainment." *Interzone*'s given plenty of evidence of this in the past in stories such as "Irene's Song" and "The Original Doctor Shade," to pick out two fine examples. *IZ*'s editorial policy is almost bound to occasionally throw up stories which will have readers cancelling their subscriptions in outrage. However this is preferable to a "play safe" policy which gets people cancelling their subscriptions in boredom. I for one do wish to be challenged by at least some of the fiction I read, which is why I'm renewing my subscription.

**Nigel Davies**

Yiewsley, Middx.

Dear Editors:

As Ken Brown noted in *Interzone* 64, "barely rational attacks on everything Japanese" by Americans, like Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun*, are annoying. Equally annoying are anti-American diatribes by Britons like James Lovegrove's "Britworld™" in *Interzone* 66. I have no sympathy with anti-Japanese ranting by Americans. Nobody forced them to buy Japanese cars, TVs, or stereos. I'm not really moved by British complaints about the encroachment of American culture on their country either. Nobody's forcing them to eat at McDonald's, watch the Superbowl or *Dallas*, or listen to Madonna. Nobody's forcing them to turn their country into Disneyland either.

I realize that I'm going to be accused of taking a satire like "Britworld™" too seriously. Yes, I realize that it's meant to be funny, but that's a cop-out. It's also typical of one difference between Britons and Americans. When they get paranoid, Americans produce hysterical, belligerent books like *Rising Sun*, while Britons become snide and smug, as Lovegrove has in "Britworld™."

Incidentally, if Lovegrove wants to make fun of Americans, he can at least try to accurately parody American dialects. If the narrator Wanda-May-June is supposed to be American, she would never use the term "merchandising kiosk." She would also not explain the word "bus" by referring to the word "coach." It's "coach" that's unfamiliar to Americans, not "bus." Also, if the name "Wanda-May-June" is intended as a parody of the southern American tradition of double names for women, please note that such names are not hyphenated.

**Wendell Wagner, Jr.**

Greenbelt, Maryland

**Editor:** Apologies for inadequate editing. We realized James Lovegrove had made an error over the use of the word "bus" – wasn't Bus Stop a well-known American play and film of the 1950s? – but we forgot to correct his text in time. As for the merits of his satire in general, those are for each reader to judge. We found it quite amusing, and most of our American readers seem to have taken it in good part.

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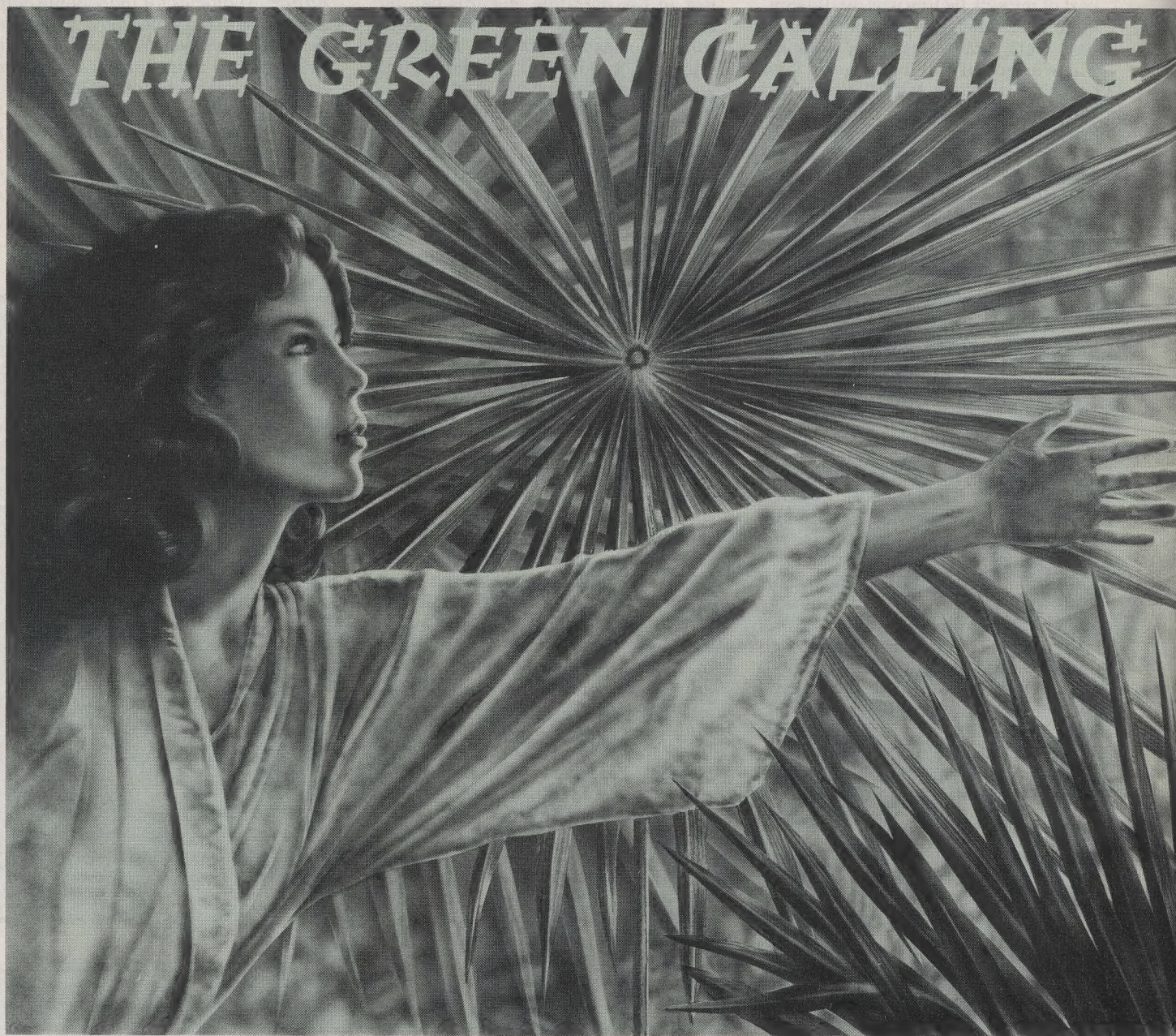
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# THE GREEN CALLING



**S**he feels she is losing her humanity, bleeding into the green and the damp. Her flesh is sprouting silvery, scaly fungus that has to be dabbed with ointment every night. She is never dry. And now, trapped and held by the vengeful green, the legends no longer seem implausible.

It was Canvey's notes that started it off.

*"At night, the man-woman looked in through the screen door. It seemed to be naked, its skin covered in a green pigment."*

A man-woman? Could mean anything. An effeminate boy, a masculine girl. Some deranged dream of Canvey's. Perhaps only an illusion, kindled in the sputtering lamplight; a face beyond the screen. The green calling.

Silva wishes she'd never seen those words. It is too easy to believe in them when it's dark.

She dreamed of rain for three consecutive nights before she began the journey that led her inevitably to Canvey's Retreat, on the inner jungled slope of an extinct volcano, in the heart of the Neotropic cloud forest in this remarkably preserved region of Central

America. Not gentle, soothing rain but furious hot downpours; unending and corroding. It was presentiment perhaps, or just an educated guess.

Now, bathed in a patina of her own sweat, she sits gazing at the gauze-covered window openings of the Retreat, wrapped in a steamy lamp-light haze, listening to the pitiless downpour beyond the mouldering walls. Dying insects convulse upon the page beneath her hands, poisoned by the odourless insecticide painted onto the inner walls. The desk she is sitting at groans as she shifts her position to glance at the place above her right wrist, where her dark-coloured shirt leaves the skin exposed. There is a strange discolouration of the flesh there, a strange consistency. Deliberately, Silva pulls down her sleeve. A rogue torturing thought meanders through her sluggish mind: I will never go home, never. I will stay here forever until the moulds and the lichens cover me and kill me. She stands up abruptly to stem the discouraging mantra. She opens the screen door and looks outside.

Beyond the meagre light of the lamp, the night is hot-breathed, pungent, saturated darkness. Silva



# STORM CONSTANTINE

Illustrations by Gerry Grace



feels the jungle's presence rather than sees it; she senses its voluptuous oppressiveness. She knows that somewhere out there her companion preservationist, Lal, is intruding into the brutal, deadly lushness, perhaps crouched beneath a drooping tree-fern, or squatting on the sodden walkway that cuts a perilous pathway through the foliage.

"Where are you?" Silva hisses into the night.

Lal is not human, but a multi-task biomech, laboratory-bred, laboratory-tested. To some degree Silva shares this heritage, even though her specialities, her genetic nudges, are widely different from Lal's. In many ways, the jungle is their mother, enveloping and vast: it spawned the plants that surrendered the magical elixirs which permeated the womblike fluids in which Lal was constructed by molecular computers and Silva floated as a foetus. Silva, like Lal, is an experiment. For the experiment to be successful, she will never age. She is the daughter of Longevity Program VI. The fate of daughters/sons one to five remains unknown to her.

Silva does not want to call out into the dark. She is

afraid of what she might invoke, something other than the sleek wet form of Lal, something so very *other*. Then again, she hates to be alone here at night. It is too easy to succumb to the feeling that she is being watched. She has two human assistants, Luis and Jesus, who are locals, but they take one of the vehicles back down the trail to the village at the end of every afternoon. Silva is spending more and more time alone, poring over the documents and data-disks that are bursting from every damp wooden box and rusting crate in the Retreat. Most of them can be junked but there are jewels to be found; Canvey was one of Virichem's best operatives. Now that he is dead, his notes and files are treated with reverence. They are to be preserved – the paper documents laminated, the magnetic media transferred to holocrystal. Canvey supervises these procedures from the walls. There are dozens of photographs of him as a young man pinned up around the desk. He was 67 when he died; alone, uncared-for, malnourished. The victim of a stroke. There are no photographs of himself as an older man. Only the memory of his youth kept him company.



And who knows what wild ideas Canvey came up with, living alone here in this wilderness? Who knows what he might have discovered?

“So much information is lost every day,” Silva’s mentor Alcestis once said to her. “Every day, priceless human knowledge crumbles to dust, data is corrupted, never to be regained.”

“But surely someone else will think of it one day,” Silva said, frowning. “There are so many of us. Someone will think the same thing again.”

“That is not the point,” Alcestis replied stiffly. “Each mind colours the information it generates with its own unique tone. There is no such thing as precise reproduction.”

It was Alcestis who encouraged Silva to specialize in information preservation. Alcestis was a young research grad then. Now, she is a woman going grey who’s discovered her metabolism is inexorably slowing down. Silva still looks like a teenager. She and Alcestis have maintained a close friendship via computer link for a long time, but never meet face to face any more. Alcestis resents growing old.

Thinking of Alcestis, Silva wonders whether she should go back indoors and call her via the laptop. The laptop will not last for much longer, she is sure. At this very moment, in this landscape of speedy adaptation, a new mould is bound to be developing that specializes in eating computers. Silva wants to tell Alcestis about the patch of strange skin on her arm; she wants reassurance. Alcestis has a medical background; she will know things the over-worked, not-too-informed local doctor will not. Silva has been putting this call off for several days.

She glances at her watch to try and work out what time it is where Alcestis lives. The watch has stopped. She notices its face is partly occluded by a yellowish stain. Tears of weary frustration gather in her eyes. A dear friend, years dead, gave her that watch. Now it is tainted, half eaten by the jungle. She removes it lovingly, saying under her breath, “I hate this place.”

The laptop makes a disturbingly unfamiliar noise when Silva turns it on; a tired whine deep in its micro-depths. A moment of panic, the fear of being isolated, is interrupted by a more sensible thought: so, order another one! (But what if the roof-dish falls apart? What if... What if...?) The computer utters a musical sequence. Silva squats down in front of it and turns off the video eye. Presently Alcestis’s face will appear on the screen, while all Alcestis will see on her home monitor is Virichem’s logo. It is better that way. Silva is worried that if Alcestis should see her, she’d be compelled to make some kind of light-hearted sarcastic comment. Silva doesn’t want to hear anything like that, because the words will drip with pained bitterness. The two women haven’t seen one another for years. People like Silva never feel comfortable speaking about what makes them different. There is a kind of unity in that. At least, Silva has never heard them speak. In the centre where she grew up, there were other genetic experiments; some more obviously so than others. They never fell for the line that they were “special.” Some of them died too young, others simply fell apart:

emotionally, psychologically and in a few sad cases, physically. Silva is one of the lucky ones. And yet, even now, at the age of 37, there is a danger Silva might begin to age dramatically, or develop a plague of cancers, become blind, lose her hair. She has seen some of those things happen to others. Bald children eaten from the inside; faulty flesh machines. The time that Silva lives through never really feels as if it belongs to her. Is that because of what she is, or simply part of feeling human, being a woman? Does Alcestis feel the same?

“Oh, you’re going out.” It is obvious to Silva than Alcestis has dressed up for some occasion. Gems sparkle at the corner of each eye. The woman looks good; she’s lost weight, although the lines on her face seem deeper.

“Silva! How are you? How’s the jungle! Oh God, it’s been so long! I feel awful... I’m just...” Alcestis pulls a comical face, and sits down before her video eye. “What the hell! Five minutes? He can wait!”

“You look great!”

“Nonsense! You can only see me from the waist up. Gravity is winning the battle with my will-power, my love, never mind my muscles! I’ve got Researcher’s Arse; some from sitting at a monitor all day!”

“No really, you look...”

Alcestis interrupts. “So, how’s it going? Had Canvey discovered all the secrets of the universe as everyone thought?”

Silva shakes her head, even though Alcestis can’t see her. “If he did, I’ve yet to come across the evidence. I think he was off his head at the end. There’s some very weird stuff.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think he was seeing things! I’ve found these notes about, well, *creatures*.” Silva’s laugh sounds a little embarrassed even to herself.

“Creatures, eh!” Alcestis grins and wipes a lock of hair from her brow. “What kind?”

“He describes them as green men-women.”

Alcestis shakes her head. “Hmm, perhaps you should lose that stuff! Sure he wasn’t writing a novel?”

“Hadn’t thought of that actually. He was looking into local legends, though I’m not sure whether he made them up. This place is a bit creepy.”

“Yeah, you sound... tense.”

Silva is sure that Alcestis is wondering whether she should ask her to turn on the video eye. Her concern would make her want to inspect her friend, but Silva knows Alcestis is afraid that what she would see might sicken her, anger her. She’d once said, “the worst thing about growing old is that I can remember what it was like to be beautiful.” Silva respects that and yet she wants Alcestis to see her. She needs reassurance.

“It’s bad for the health here, so damp.”

“How much longer have you got to stay?”

Silva shrugs. “Until the job’s done. I’ve got a biomech assistant, but Rodgers gave it some other task to do. It’s always out collecting samples. Isn’t much help. Al...”

“What?” The image suddenly shifts, blurs. Silva’s heart jumps. Don’t fade, don’t go...

“I’ve got this patch on my arm. Think it’s some kind of fungus, but it won’t respond to treatment.”



Alcestis frowns. "Is it spreading?"  
"No... I don't think so. It doesn't hurt. I've tried a topical anti-fungal agent on it, which might be keeping it down, but it won't cure it. Everything gets eaten by mould and fungus here. I don't like it."

"Can you get to a local doctor?"

"Yeah, it was she who gave me the ointment."

"What was her prognosis?"

Silva sighs. "She sees so much, so many diverse ailments. The jungle causes them. She says she often sees cases that she knows she'll never see again. She didn't seem that worried though."

"But you are..."

"Well... I suppose I've got a touch of Cabin Fever." She laughs. "I'm scared I'll turn into a walking mushroom, like something out of an old Japanese movie!"

"Are there any other symptoms?" Alcestis asks, suddenly and sharply.

"What do you mean?" There is a moment of tense silence, during which Silva incubates a hot core of anger. "It's not cancer!" she says at last, "and no, there are no other symptoms."

There is another moment of silence and then Alcestis says, "Turn on the video, Silv."

"No, there's no need. I'm fine."

"We had a promise!"

"Now is not the time to honour it, Al. Really. I'm fine."

Alcestis sighs. "Look, I'm not going to mince words. Get back to that doctor and, if she has the facilities in that godforsaken place, get her to check you for soft sores. You can't afford to play around, Silv."

Silva is furious. She wants to say, "you want me to die, you want me to fall apart. You're wishing it!" but it is not in her nature to confront people. "OK," she says.

"I mean it, Silv!"

"I said OK. Look, don't you have a date waiting? I'll call you back some time. Take care, Al." Abruptly, Silva breaks the connection.

For several minutes she sits stiffly, paralyzed by rage. How dare Alcestis say those things! She inspects the place on her arm where the discolouration stains her skin. It is not a soft sore, she is sure. It's something else, it has to be; something jungle-born. The face of Canvey, youthfully thin, grins down from the wall. He stares beyond her.

**S**ilva lies sleepless on her bed, the Retreat grinding and flexing around her. The forest is chastened by a hurrying wind. Before dawn, Lal comes in and stands by the window processing information. Its hum is comforting, even though it lacks the human desire or sensitivity to utter a greeting to Silva. Its shape is almost human so that it can give public presentations without causing distress to children. It can speak in a computerized voice that sounds vaguely West Indian.

Staring at it in the dark, Silva is convinced it has a personality, a soul; Lal just keeps itself to itself. Its work fascinates it, but nothing else is of interest. It is blessed with the ability never to feel lonely. Neither, Silva is sure, can it feel afraid.

**E**arly morning. Mist hangs down from the forest canopy in shrouds. The air is not hot, but it is very humid. Silva is standing on the damp wooden walkway that has been constructed as a precarious safe route through the forest. The planks feel spongy underfoot; already the wood is rotting. Silva is playing a game with herself. In this game, the forest is the garden of Eden, the primordial garden. In Eden, there was only one of every tree, shrub and fern. Here, it is the same – almost. Two tree ferns, remnants of a prehistoric age, grow close together in the lush foliage. Overhead, aerial gardens of orchids, ferns and mosses droop tendrils downwards. Everything is poisonous in Eden – plants, animals and insects – but Silva knows that natives to this land build up an immunity to such things. Luis and Jesus are up at the Retreat transferring some data Silva has prepared onto holo-crystals. Today, Silva is trying to feel positive, actively fighting lethargic depression. (There is nothing wrong with me.) Standing here, on this narrow sanctuary, she has to fight the compulsion to step off the path. Potential death lies to either side. Luis has told her to watch out for the ajo vine; if someone steps on one they become irretrievably lost in the forest.

*What would happen if I did that? Are there any foundations to their legends? Perhaps the vine gives off some kind of vapour if it's bruised that causes disorientation. There is an explanation for everything.*

The forest canopy meets over her head and invisible animals and birds traverse the aerial pathways. Silva squints upwards, narrowing her eyes into the green.

*What else lives here unseen?*

The jungle is older than memory, and though partially ravished by the encroachment of humanity, still able to reserve a deep inner chastity that is both dangerous and inviolable. Silva wonders whether she can will something inexplicable to manifest before her eyes, whether she can fool the jungle into giving up one of its secrets. Green men-women? The wistful fancies of a lonely madman. No such thing. And yet, as she thinks that, the sensation of unseen eyes fixed upon her unguarded back sweeps over her like a wash of fetid, warm water. She can smell something that reminds her of vomit, or certain species of fungi; sweet carrion. Something is waiting to drop onto her from the whispering canopy; something is *thinking* of dropping down onto her. She looks over her shoulder, and there is a blur of green movement at the corner of her vision, but then there are always blurs of green movement in this place. Silva has yet to develop what Luis and Jesus call search image – a refined visual sensitivity to the teeming shadows of the jungle. There is nothing between me and the Retreat, she thinks. I can get back at any time. She can even see the walls of the place at the end of the walkway: a short run.

The noise of the forest seems to have fallen; it is like a song being sung in a lower key than usual. Silva's precise footsteps sound loud on the soaked boards. She turns her gaze back up towards the canopy overhead, strains to discern some camouflaged shape amid the green. Then there is a sound which could have been a human laugh or the call of a bird, and a cascade of warm liquid splashes down onto Silva's upturned face. She splutters and stumbles, surrounded by a



lemon ammonia reek. Urine! It has got into her eyes, her mouth. She is blind, fumbling along the hand-rail, retching uncontrollably. Luckily, Luis hears her curses and spittings, and comes out of the Retreat to investigate. He laughs as he hears her angry explanation, as she wrings her trembling wet hands and paws the front of her shirt.

Urine. Yes. Monkeys do that. Piss onto travellers. Monkeys.

Later, her hair and body washed in the primitive shower – luke-warm gritty water – her mouth well sluiced with mint mouthwash, Silva sits down at Canvey's desk to work. Her head is wrapped in a towel, her body in a robe. Lal lurks somewhere in the room behind her, though wrapped in its own thoughts as usual.

Earlier, Silva asked it what it thought about Canvey's notes on the subject of humanoid life-forms in the forest. Lal was philosophical.

"I would rule nothing out in this place. So much of this territory is uncatalogued, but then one would suppose the natives would know more about it, if it existed."

"Supposing they'd want to tell us," Silva added. "We are the despoilers after all."

"I doubt whether everyone holds that view," Lal said, and then utilizing its intuition banks, added, "Have you discovered some more evidence to support Canvey's theory?"

Silva shrugged. "I don't think so. Perhaps I'm looking too hard for evidence, and they do say that an obsessed seeker will inevitably find what they're looking for... in one way or another."

"Whether they create it for themselves or not," Lal added. "Perhaps that explains Canvey's notes. He was searching for a dream."

Silva laughed. It amused her to hear the machine speak in that way.

"I intend to work outdoors tonight," Lal said. "Will you be all right alone?"

It was the first time it had expressed concern for Silva's welfare. She immediately became suspicious, defensive. "Of course I will! Why shouldn't I be?"

Lal was impervious to waspishness. "Well, keep the bleeper by you anyway. I won't be too far away."

As Lal ambled, in its strange gliding gait, towards the screen door, Silva grabbed a limb that, in a human, would be an arm. "What do you know?" she said, eyes narrowed.

"Regarding what?"

"Why are you suddenly bothered about my well-being?"

Lal gently pulled away from her hold. "I am merely empathizing with you. You are my close colleague. It is one of my utilities."

Silva let it go.

The night presses down on Silva. She is trying to read some scrawling notes of Canvey's, which at some time must have got wet. It is a difficult, rather pointless task. She has her hands over her ears, because she keeps tuning in on strange noises outside. Of course, these noises will have been there ever since she arrived, only now her active mind insists on applying labels to them. She can hear what sounds

like whispered conversation in high, clicking voices, or conversation that's coming from an old radio hidden just inside the forest. Occasionally, a howler monkey will roar like a drunken man. There are no lights outside.

Her arm is itching slightly. When she scratches the strange skin, some greasy, silver scales come off under her nails. Soft sores? No! Soft sores usually originate in the groin or armpits; moist areas. (But everywhere is moist in this climate!)

"Oh, stop scaring yourself!" Silva says out loud.

She turns a page. Canvey was writing in brown ink, a colour like dried blood. She realizes she hasn't been reading the words for some time; only scanning the pages while paying acute attention to her own agonized thoughts. Now, a few sentences seem to leap at her from the page. Above them are some notes on forest biomass; below a list of provisions Canvey once required from the research station downtrail. But the words in between, like a bolt of inspiration, stand out alone. Curling script. A feeling of ancient times.

*"They come at night – though never seen. Dawn – they manifest, come through to me. Green dawn – time of the undying. Like water children; sleek as seals, or fish..."*

Silva reads the words several times. She cannot help feeling that Canvey must have woken up momentarily from a lethargic state, become truly alive, to write them.

Silva can feel her heart bumping. Sitting there alone in the modest halo of the hurricane lamp, there can be no question of disbelieving what Canvey wrote. He meant it. He'd seen what he wrote about.

At first light, a flock of birds known as the *guaradabarrancas*, the guardians of the ravine, wake Silva with their tinkling song. It sounds as if a thousand wind chimes are being subtly excited by a tantalizing breeze. The light, when Silva opens her eyes, is opalescent, glowing. Gold-green radiance falls in spears across her bed, shining motes held in the beams. The air is cool, caressing, and has a sparkling taste, like fern wine. Silva is caught in a transient moment of pure Earth beauty, those times when the planet unveils itself, when it does not realize it is being observed by a member of the hungry race it spawned. Silva stretches languorously, ignorant of the moment, simply being it, when she becomes aware of the unfamiliar shape in the room. She realizes someone is standing among the long coats – most of them Canvey's, one hers – that hang near the door.

"Lal," Silva says, and props herself up on her elbows in the bed.

The shape moves forward a pace from the shadows. It is slim, green, alien; not Lal at all. Silva thinks: Should I scream, jump up, find a weapon, or wake up? These thoughts are quite lucid and calm.

Instead, she does nothing but observe.

The figure, though uncomfortably unfamiliar and impossible to categorize, has a sleek, streamlined beauty. There is a feeling about it of extreme age, yet vibrant youthfulness. It is hairless, and apparently sexless, though reminiscent of both genders. Muscular yet slight. Its eyes are a phosphorescent vivid green, like quetzal feathers. Despite its alien appearance,



Silva is very much aware of its consummate Earthly origin. It is like the tinkling birdsong, the wild hazardous beauty of the forest, the magical light, made flesh. Like Silva, it is ageless.

"We are kin... in a way," Silva thinks. There is no fear inside her, only a huge sense of expectancy.

Her visitor extends an arm; too long, out of proportion. It opens its mouth as if it is shaping words, but no sound comes out. It is encased by the ancient gold light of the cloud forest.

Then, the moment of pure beauty is ended, and the light changes, the birds lift from the trees in a ravening crowd, their song disordered.

Silva blinks into the shadows that are left behind. There is no one the room with her.

**A**lcestis calls midmorning.

"Can you believe it, Rod's going to be working just a hundred or so clicks away from you. Isn't that a coincidence?" Alcestis laughs. Today, she is very much "at home," her hair tied up in a girlish knot on top of her head, peacock-blue silk kimono hanging open to reveal the upper curves of a chest that is deeply tanned, but the skin is beginning to crinkle, like the most delicate tissue paper.

"Who's Rod?" Silva asks. She cannot help sounding cold because she hasn't forgiven Alcestis for the previous conversation they had.

"I've been seeing him... Oh, he's inconsequential! The important thing is that I've invited myself out there with him! Silva, I'll be able to visit you!"

Silva is stunned by these words. Alcestis sounds like an excited teenager. She has not suggested a meeting since... since Silva hit 25 and Alcestis hit 30. A parting of the ways. Tacit veil drawn over their association, the friendship mutating into whispers through the veil.

"Here?" Silva's voice sounds choked.

"There!"

"When?"

Alcestis pulls a face, shrugs. "Oh, a few days' time. Can't specify exactly when. I'll have a look around... I'm interested in Rod's field, after all. Maybe I'll play the entertaining companion for a while before scrounging some company transport and heading up to see you."

"It's not an easy journey," Silva says.

"No, it isn't," Alcestis agrees blithely.

"It's really very boring here."

"You're trying to put me off, aren't you!" Alcestis utters another laugh, almost convincingly.

"We haven't seen one another for so long."

"I want to see you, Sil."

**S**ilva is thrown into a panic by the threat of Alcestis's impending visit. She gets Luis to drive her down to the doctor's surgery in the village again. The doctor is a small Spanish woman, who, to Silva, looks as if she should be the heroine of a romantic novel.

Silva grins as she extends her arm for examination. "Can't you just scrape this stuff off?"

The doctor ignores the suggestion. "Any pain?"

"No."

"Itching?"

"A little."





"Try this ointment."

"Haven't I tried this before?"

"No."

Silva sighs. "What is it? You must have some idea."

The doctor shakes her small, perfect head. "I've seen nothing like it. At least it isn't spreading."

Silva clears her throat and utters the words she hates. "Could it be... cancerous?"

The doctor glances at her sharply. She knows nothing of Silva's background. "If it is, I've never seen cancer like it before. I'm fairly sure it's a simple fungal infection." She hesitates. "I could send a tissue sample down to the research station, if you're worried."

Silva stares at her arm for a moment, sucking her upper lip. "Perhaps... Yes. Do." She wonders whether she should mention what she saw that morning standing in her room, but decides against it. It could have been an hallucination, another terrifying symptom of an unspecified decline bubbling through, but she doesn't think it was. She doesn't *feel* it was. But then, of course, she'd make herself think that. The alternative is too horrible. She doesn't want to discuss it.

**O**n the way back to the Retreat, partially comforted by having been touched by medical hands, Silva carefully interrogates Luis about Canvey. Luis manoeuvres the four-wheel-drive vehicle with the panache of a rebellious teenager in his first car. Silva hangs on grimly to the roll bar.

"Canvey had some pretty weird ideas about what lived in the jungle," she says, as introduction. "Have you bothered to read any of his stuff while you've worked with it?"

Luis curls his lip and shakes his head. "No. He was a strange man. But these genius types often are, aren't they?"

Luis was educated in the city. Although born in a local village, his manners are very urbane, his speech barely accented. Now he works for Virichem, flitting between isolated research retreats. He has many skills in advanced technology, but is still essentially just a handyman.

"Perhaps it drove Canvey mad, living here alone," Silva says.

"He wasn't mad," Luis answers shortly. "He just didn't want to be an old man."

"Did you know him well?"

"He was a very nice person."

Silva realizes this avenue of enquiry is going to be unproductive. "I wonder where he got these ideas about green-skinned people that live hidden in the forest..." There is no response. "Is that a well-known legend?"

"This land is alive with legends," Luis answers, with the pride of a man who has secrets the interloper can never penetrate. "There are whole cities buried beneath the vines. Deserted now, of course, but who knows what race once lived in them."

"Any of these ruins near here?"

"No. Not that have been uncovered anyway."

"Do you believe the green-skinned people exist, Luis?"

He grins at her as he savagely changes gear. Silva's head makes abrupt and painful contact with the roll bar. "Now what kind of question is that?" Luis says,

grinning, and shakes his head.

She wonders what he'd say if she told him she thought she'd seen one of these people. She wants to believe that, because of his vague answers, Luis knows more than he lets on, but perhaps she is deluding herself, seeing evidence where there is none. Already her memory of the visitation is dimming. It's hard to believe she didn't dream it.

**I**n the dawn, they come to her again – three of them this time. Silva slips from her bed and follows them out of the Retreat, acquiescing to, rather than obeying, their soft, insistent beckoning. Outside the air is radiant and the song of the guarabarrancas is a fountain of sound. Silva can see a golden walkway, a mist of gleaming rays, leading into the forest. She can walk upon it. It vanishes through the thick foliage, down the side of the ravine. I am dreaming, Silva thinks, and keeps on walking. She passes the still form of a great sloth hanging from a low branch. She has never seen one this close before. Its fur is green with algae, and inhabited by silver moths. A ribbon of data, remembered from Canvey's notes, which she read the day before, passes across her mind. "*The majority of animals survive in this landscape by specializing... sometimes they are invisible to the casual observer...*"

"I have the search image," Silva murmurs. "Now I can see."

The people of the green lead her downwards, to the heart of the dead volcano.

She stands upon a wide grey slab, gilded by lichens. A crowd of Canvey's dream people sway around her like blades of grass or stripes of viridian water; insubstantial. They reach out to touch her skin, nodding their small heads to one another, but she cannot feel their touch. One of them fingers her patch of scaly skin and recoils, as if burned. It flushes a deeper green, and communicates without speech in an agitated way to its companions.

"They believe I am the future of humanity," Silva thinks. "And I am not." She feels they are pleased, even excited, by the phenomenon of her. How long have they been here? Are they recent blossomings of the humid, breathing green or the last remnants of an ancient breed? Silva does not know how to reach them. She feels too dazed to think rationally, too tired to lift an arm.

**A**lcestis takes charge as soon as she arrives, striding into the Retreat, throwing down her travelling bag, standing with hands on hips to address the two men, who look up at her with resentful suspicion.

"It stinks in here!" she announces, by way of greeting. "Where's Silva?"

Jesus resumes his work with deliberate slowness, leaving Luis, who he knows can handle these city types, to answer the woman's question.

"She's not here."

"Then where can I find her?"

Luis shrugs. "She's probably outside."

"You're not being very helpful," Alcestis growls.

"I don't know where Ms Merin is," Luis responds politely. "She is under no obligation to report her movements to us. Can I be of assistance to you, Ms...?"



"I'm here to see Silva." Alcestis turns a complete circle on the spot, appraising the Retreat. "This place is falling apart. It smells like old mushrooms. How could anyone live here voluntarily?"

Luis is aware the question is rhetorical. "The job is nearly done," he says.

Alcestis raises her brows. "So quickly? When I spoke to Silva a week ago, she implied there was quite some ground to cover yet."

Luis clears his throat, and pointedly drops his eyes from Alcestis' stare. "It appears Ms Merin has discarded a large amount of material she felt was superfluous." He shrugs. "There was little here worth saving anyway."

Luis and Jesus do not know when Silva will be back. They say they haven't seen much of her for the past few days. Alcestis makes direct enquiries about her friend's health, but all the men will say is that Silva made two visits to the doctor downtrail. She does not, in their opinion, look ill.

When Lal makes an appearance soon afterwards, Alcestis does not find it at all helpful. The biomech is intent only on telling her about the research it has been conducting. "The evolutionary thrust in this area is towards a vast variety of species, with a wide area of dispersal. There is no spring protein pulse in the neotropics, therefore..."

"Excuse me," Alcestis interrupts. "This is no doubt very interesting, but I'm more concerned about Silva. Where is she and how is she?"

"Some varieties of species have yet to be discovered by us," Lal finishes. "Silva will be back at sunfall. She has adopted this habit recently. As to her physical condition, I would say this locality causes her stress. She is not sleeping well."

As it is early in the day, Alcestis decides to drive down to the village and speak to the doctor there. Before making this visit, before badgering her casual lover Rod into letting her come over here with him, she had wheedled her way into getting her hands on the case notes of previous longevity experiment subjects. Deterioration of their condition had begun with skin cancer; rapid aging had followed, accompanied by dementia, and paranoid hallucination. To her mind, Silva is very much in danger of going the same way. Alcestis has remained alert to the nuances of Silva's voice, even though she has refused to see her. The woman she spoke to recently was not the Silva she remembered. There was a vagueness about her, which Alcestis felt camouflaged a kind of panic.

As she sends her vehicle screaming and bouncing down the outer skin of the volcano, she mutters to herself. "Would this be worth a few more years of youth? I don't think so! Who are they kidding! Why don't they give up!"

At the surgery, she claims to be Silva Merin's physician and friend, and demands information. The small Spanish woman clearly objects to Alcestis' hectoring manner, and makes soft remarks about confidentiality.

"Don't you know anything about Silva Merin?" Alcestis demands, or rather accuses, and when no answer is forthcoming, replies to her question herself. No! For your information, she is the product of genetic engineering. She is 37 years old."





The doctor's eyes widen in surprise.

"Yes!" Alcestis says triumphantly. "And there is the possibility she is prone to sarcoma, oat-cell cancer in particular. I know she consulted you for a skin disorder. Didn't you bother to have samples analyzed?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," the woman answers stiffly. "They are currently being processed. I only took the sample a week ago."

Alcestis rolls her eyes almost gleefully. "You should have taken a sample when you first saw her! Was there evidence of any other disorders? What about her mental state?"

"She seemed like a very self-possessed young woman. The sore she showed me did not resemble oat-cell. It was a fungal infection."

"I hope you're right!" Alcestis snaps. "Let me know the minute you get those results. I'm staying up at Canvey's Retreat."

As soon as she walks into the Retreat, Alcestis knows the men have been talking about her. The thick silence contained by the rotting walls is gravid with recently-uttered criticism. Lal too has a furtive air, hovering in the background.

"You!" Alcestis says, pointing at the biomech. "Am I wrong, or is one of your functions to monitor the condition of your colleague in remote employment locations?"

"You are not wrong," Lal answers silkily, gliding forward. "Might I be of assistance?"

"Have you monitored Silva recently?"

"I monitor her constantly, as a background utility."

"And you have computed no conclusions as to her condition?"

"She is under stress. She worries."

"And the skin problem?"

"She has a fungal infection."

Alcestis makes a growling noise to signify her exasperation. "You took samples?"

"No. She has not asked me to."

Alcestis narrows her eyes and jerkily nods her head. "Well, you're certainly fulfilling all your functions, aren't you, lovey! Have you noticed no evidence of disorientation, absent-mindedness?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not that familiar with Ms Merin's personality to ascertain whether or not she is behaving abnormally." The biomech sounds frosty. "Now, if you will excuse me..." It attempts to pass by the woman, who is blocking the door.

"Fetch her," Alcestis says firmly. "I need to see Silva now. Although none of you appear to have noticed, she needs attention. Urgently."

Lal answers politely. "I would comply with your request if I could, but regret I don't know where Ms Merin is at this present time."

Another growl. "Don't give me that! Of course you know where she is, or else you're an inferior model in a Meg6 skin! What are you playing at?"

The men have remained silent, almost as if they hope their lack of noise will make them invisible to this storming female. Now, Luis clears his throat and says, "She strays off the trail. She could be anywhere. Only the walkways are monitored."

"And you haven't tried to stop her!" Alcestis explodes. "Doesn't her behaviour strike you as irrational? She is not a person to take unnecessary risks."

Luis' eyes drop back to his work.

"This is outrageous!" Alcestis shouts. She flexes her shoulders. "Well if none of you will go out and bring Silva back, I will! Tell me where to start looking at least!"

For a tense moment, there is only silence and then Jesus mumbles. "You could try the path down to the crater." He cringes beneath Luis' sudden warning glance.

"There is no path," Luis says in a low voice.

Jesus shrugs. "There is now. She's made one." He points through the window screen. "That way: down."

Silva is lying in a pool of green radiance, surrounded by the swaying, lustrous forms of the forest born. Their eyes glow fondly, mirroring the flashing feathers of the flock of quetzals that wheel about their heads. The rarest birds. Never more than one sighted at a time. A flock of the rarest birds. Silva sighs. She can feel her limbs melting into the green, into the moist earth. She is enveloped by the scent of unstoppable growth, enwombed by it. It all seems so clear to her now.

Canvey knew. He knew what these people were. Now, she cannot believe the emaciated husk that was found lying on the bed in the Retreat was really him. She feels he is close to her, one of them. He is watching her now, just a few feet away. She does not dispute his body died, but the spirit of him, the spirit... Another sigh escapes her like a breath of dawn mist. Canvey knew. He had the search image. He learned to see the immortals, to become part of the miracle that is unfurling here amid the green. And she is becoming part of it too. The forest spawned her; a miracle spore helped unravel the braids of her DNA and reformed them in a secret image. Sentience. Green sentience. And now she is home, unravelling once more, transforming.

The figures lean over her, spinning round in her sight, and ribbons of her essence spill out to be taken by their hands. They will dance these ribbons into a new shape. And she welcomes it.

Alcestis can see at once that degeneration is taking place. She can see Silva lying on her back in a clearing in the forest that looks as if it has been torn out by human hands. Alcestis has no doubt that, should she examine Silva's hands, they will be cut and abraded by vines and tough stems. Insects will have burrowed into her unprotected skin, laid their eggs there, liquefied her flesh to feed. Uttering a cry of heartfelt anguish, Alcestis pushes her body frantically through the resistant green. In the emerald light of the forest, Silva's damp skin looks greenish, terminally sick. There is hardly any flesh to her at all. She appears at once mummified and putrescent.

"No, no, no..." Alcestis murmurs a prayer of denial as she stumbles over the short remaining distance that separates her from her friend. She falls to her knees and scoops Silva up in her arms, horror and an unfamiliar sense of helplessness bringing equally unfamiliar tears to her eyes. She hugs the flimsy body to her. "No, no, no..." But even as she tries to deny the terror of what is happening, and fights an inevitable,



desperate grief, there is a sickening part of her that thinks, "She is not beautiful any more. She is not young." The sly inner voice that utters these words is almost too soft to be heard. It can easily be silenced, or ignored.

Suddenly, Silva twitches in Alcestis' arms. "Sil! It's me!" Alcestis croons. "I'm here. I'll take you back... God, why didn't any of those ass-holes do anything about this!"

Silva moans and turns her head slowly from side to side. Then she opens her eyes, and Alcestis can see that they are filmed, unfocused, the eyes of a dead woman, or someone so old their sight is obscured by cataracts. She realizes then that taking Silva anywhere would be futile. It is too late. The experiment, though undoubtedly useful, has failed.

"Al," Silva murmurs. "What are you doing?"

"Doing? Doing? I'm gonna have Virichem by the balls, that's what! That goddamned biomech must have known this was happening, must have been monitoring... God, it's sick! They knew! They did nothing!"

"No," Silva murmurs. "They don't know... They don't have..." She manages a weak smile, a grim parody that resembles the grin of a fleshless skull. "It's all right, Al, don't be scared. This is all part of it..."

"Oh, my baby!" Alcestis grips Silva's body firmly, as if trying to keep her spirit earthbound. "I'm with you. Of course it's all right."

"No." Summoning what must be the dregs of her strength, Silva tries to raise herself. "Can't you see? Can't you see them?"

"Who, honey?"

"The forest-born. They're all around us. Look, Al, look at them. This is why you don't have to worry. They're taking care of me, taking care of me during my change..."

Alcestis feels a finger of fear claw her spine. For a moment, she feels Silva is talking sense. But all she has to do is raise her head to see that they are alone in the forest.

"There's no one here," she says.

Silva frowns and then stretches her papery lips back into a ghastly smile. "Oh, of course. You don't have the search image. But you will Al, if you stay here long enough. You will. And then we can be together always." She sighs weakly and her head drops back against Alcestis' arm. Her hair is coming out on the sleeve of Alcestis' jacket. Her body is a decaying husk holding the soul of a vibrant girl. So cruel.

"This is what life does to us," Alcestis thinks. "This will come to me also, but in my case the stalking is slow and measured. It takes a little away, bit by bit, but at the end it will be the same."

"Oh God!" she says aloud, and throws back her head. It seems the forest, the interminable, wretched, burning green, is spinning round her head. Birds shriek and the mocking howls of monkeys fill her head. It seems they are jeering at the puny women below them. Squatting there amid the ageless green, Alcestis is painfully aware of her own mortality. It is lying in her arms. Her worst fear made manifest. Decay. Age. The bitter memory of youth. Death.

Silva's voice is little more than a grating whisper.

"Don't worry," she says, as her rebellious meat corrupts. "We can be together here always, face to face. Stay awhile. Rest awhile. We can be young together always."

**I**n the Retreat, Jesus raises his head from his work. His eyes reflect the green-glowing light as the rain-clouds gather outside. "She is blessed!" he says, in his native tongue. "It doesn't matter about that other woman."

Luis is systematically destroying data, unsure in which world his feet are rooted: the past, the present or the future. Grim-faced, he ignores his colleagues' remarks. Later, he will get drunk.

Lal mutters to itself, unheard.

Somewhere, a long way away, the daughter of Longevity Program VII draws breath. Her name is Hope, the secret name of all of who came before her.

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**Storm Constantine**, who lives in Staffordshire, is author of the novels *The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit* (1987), *The Bewitchments of Love and Hate* (1988), *The Fulfilments of Fate and Desire* (1989), *The Monstrous Regiment* (1990), *Aleph* (1991), *Hermetech* (1991), *Burying the Shadow* (1992) and *Sign for the Sacred* (1993). The last-named is reviewed by Paul McAuley in this issue of *Interzone*.

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**Timons Esaias** (see next story) is author, since 1989, of "over 100 stories, primarily in the *St Louis Bugle*, with national publications in the *Funny Times* and the *Funny Business*." He appears to be new to the science-fiction field, however, and has stories forthcoming in various small-press magazines. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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# Norbert and the System

## Timons Esaias

**H**er skirt had a stylish cut; the boots accented the shapeliness of her legs; and her social beacon, cunningly mounted above her left ear, was flashing green. Norbert, instantly taken by her graceful yet careless walk, summoned his analysis program for her personality profile and a suitable introductory line. But while he waited for the printout to flash on his lens, she stepped up onto a passing trolleyshuttle – and the moment was lost.

When the display arrived he angrily subaudibled to his Personal System, “A fine lot of good it does me now!”

“Do you want an identity search for her address and access code?” his PS inquired.

“No, I do not. Clear.” His lens screen returned to the basic display. Still seething, he demanded, “How long did you take to process my request?”

“Three seconds, request and display inclusive.”

It won’t do, he thought. How could he ever get a girl with a time-lag like that? His shyness might be a factor, but Personal Systems are supposed to make up for that.

He needed to invest in some new equipment.

**W**hile the kitchsys made his dinner, he sprawled in the bedchair and summoned the showroom program. A list of sixty-five Personal Systems in his price range crawled down his left lens, while his right displayed an index of nearly a thousand second-level options.

“Civilization can be tedious at times,” he remarked.

Judging his tone as dissatisfaction, the General System brought up a salesperson. “Good day, Shopper Kamdar! How may we assist you?”

Norbert explained his problem.

“Ah, yes. We’ve had a lot of replacement orders from shoppers with the 1200 series. Time marches on! Ha, ha!” The salesperson simulation paused for a change of mood. “Frankly, an eligible bachelor like yourself shouldn’t have to ask his PS to assess a young lady. A modern System would have started on it the second your cortex responded to her positive features. You should have had the output before the hormones hit.”

Letting that message sink in, the salesrepresentation got down to cases. “How much surgical adjustment are you willing to tolerate?... Ah! Well, then, I would suggest the latest thing out of Gabon, the 15B Jizmet. It’s powerful, but economical, and most of the hardware is rib-mounted. It takes ten ribs on a male your size, but that means three pounds less on the

head mounting you already have with the 1200! Could I consult your mounting diagram?... Yes, I see you already have four ribs converted, that’ll save on installation...”

“Gabonese?” Norbert interrupted. “What’s their track-record?”

Instantly a series of charts and tables came up on his left lens. Then his right lens scrolled a list of sports personalities currently using Gabonese Systems: heavy on defensive backs and third basemen. Quick response time.

“They’re fairly new in the market, but quite reliable. They have to be to be licensed by our Administration. Do you have a particular concern?” The rep struck just the right note of reassurance and mild contempt.

“Actually, I was just wondering how you turn it off.” Norbert chuckled awkwardly. Come to think of it, how did you turn off the System he had?

The sales-rep paused for some quick processing. “Off?” it asked with a tilt of its head.

“Yeah, you know, if it malfunctioned. An over-ride command, or an off switch. Whatever.” Norbert tried to act in control, even though he knew that a sophisticated showroom program like this could detect his insecurity in a millisecond. That’s why he rarely shopped. The salesreps reminded him of all his inadequacies, without even trying.

“An off switch? Frankly, I’ve never heard of such...” There was clearly a reset. “I do see your point, Shopper Kamdar. One does not have an off switch, however, because the failure rate for PSs is vastly lower than that for people on their own, not that there are people without Systems any more!” A statistical comparison of deaths by malfunction as opposed to expected deaths without Personal Systems flashed on his lens. “As you see, if one could shut the PS off it would put the owner at increased risk. It would be gross negligence on our part to allow that.”

“That makes sense,” Norbert admitted, getting out of his stupid question as gracefully as possible.

**N**orbert dropped into the hospital that Saturday to have his new PS installed. The waiting room bored him – everyone in it being loaded with anti-anxiety shots by their PSs – so he called up the latest flick. He hadn’t even seen the opening titles before his message light blinked: would he please go to Room 45921?

Room 45921 was in the Counselling Section, which



seemed odd. He hadn't needed counselling for the last PS. Odder still, the counsellor appeared in person, not just represented through the GS. A short, round European of some sort with an old-style half-helmet covering the back of his skull. What could a guy with an archaic set-up like that tell him about a PS?

"Shopper Kamdar, Norbert Kamdar! Sit down, sit down!" The man's jovial manner surprised Norbert. Counsellors were usually so downbeat and concerned. "Just a few questions before we do the installation."

"Is there a problem?" Norbert hated problems, and he already sensed his PS generating soothing currents in his shoulder muscles.

"We don't think so. We just want to make sure that you're getting the right product."

"I don't think I can afford to go up much further," Norbert objected, calling up his spread-sheets.

"I see that," the counsellor agreed. He scanned something on his lens. "Actually, I'm looking into your concern about System safety. This very original remark you made about an 'off switch,' to be precise."

Norbert tried, and failed, to suppress a wince. "The showroom explained that to me. I don't really know what made me think of that. Probably something about Africans and that dam that collapsed."

The counsellor paused for an update. "Ah, in Egypt. Yes. That was probably it."

"I really want this System," Norbert pointed out.

"Of course. Your PS doesn't report any unusual nightmares or anxiety problems. Is that correct?"

How did they get that data from the GS? It must be in the installation contract. Norbert agreed with the assessment. All he dreamed about were the beautiful, interesting women he never seemed to attract.

The counsellor went on in the careful tone of a prepared speech, "Shopper Kamdar, as you know, your Personal System is carefully designed to protect you from health hazards both internal and external. Your heart, lungs, brain, liver and other organs are constantly monitored for any sign of trouble. Your enzymes and hormones are adjusted for maximum health and efficiency, and your caloric intake is restricted, if necessary, by the kitchsys interface to assure proper nutrition."

"Quite. Counsellor, I..."

"But that's just part of it. Your PS is constantly updated with weather, traffic, fire, and hazard conditions which could threaten your safety. You've heard of crime in the history films, haven't you? Crime posed a significant threat to physical, financial and emotional well-being in former times, but our Personal Systems and the General System just don't allow it now. I'm sure you agree that this is all for the good."

"Yes, I do."

"Then why would you want to turn a PS off? If you were injured, it couldn't bring assistance. If people could turn their Systems off, we could have crime again! Do you want that?" The man leaned forward in an authoritative pose, which seemed too artificial. He really needed to update his software.

"No. Of course not. What I want is my new System."

The Counsellor pointed his gnarled finger at Norbert. "But are you satisfied that the System is safe?

We're not going to have you bringing up this switch business after the installation, are we?"

"No, Counsellor. I'm sorry I ever mentioned it."

"All right, then."

The guys from work dropped by to admire his new set-up. They group-viewed the latest Victoria's Secret ads, and compared baseball statistics software. Norbert found that he entertained more cleverly with the new System, and the gang stayed more than an hour before they excused themselves. A record. And he earned a party invitation, his first in weeks.

But one guy from Engineering, Howardi, stayed behind. Howardi designed bureaucracy networks, and knew people who ran things. Talking with him always reminded Norbert of the gangsters in the oldies. He always had the inside dope on everything.

"So, Norb, I got something about you on the GS the other day. Strictly upstairs stuff, but flagged to my attention. What's this about over-riding your PS?" Howardi swirled his drink in the manner management Systems tended to suggest.

Norbert's System blocked any hesitation more smoothly than he'd ever experienced before. "Oh, that! It was a silly question I asked the showroom. I don't follow hardware much, so a really dumb idea leaked out. My old PS just didn't catch it." Why would Howardi have been flagged for this? What had he stumbled into?

"Yeah, I've had some funny ideas in my time," Howardi admitted. "I've missed a warning message a time or two, as well. Embarrassing."

NOD SAGELY. Norbert nodded, though he couldn't remember ignoring a warning message in his whole life.

"You're probably wondering what the fuss is about, right? I think you may have proposed the heresy of our time! And you thought you were just a regular guy! But seriously, Norb, the PS is the cornerstone of our material culture. When the archeology teams dig us up it's going to be our defining element, the 'PS People' or something. So questioning the PS would be like an ancient Greek questioning pottery or amphorae or something." He contemplated his drink before swallowing the last.

Norbert's new System flagged him: SEE PYTHAGORAS. SEE DIOGENES.

"I sure didn't mean anything by it, Howie." Norbert said in his best subdued voice. "They straightened me out at the hospital before it went in."

"Well, that's good." Howardi got up to go. "Don't get all subversive on us, eh, Norb?"

The party wasn't bad, and he even managed to get two dates in the weeks following his new installation. The first date ended early, because she suddenly remembered that her hair needed washing.

The second girl was political. She wanted to spend the evening sitting on the benches in a public lounge area, reading political bulletin boards together.

Norbert had never kept up with politics, and didn't read the bulletin boards much. He had only posted an opinion once in his life, back when the Colts were trying to get the franchise law changed so they could get



out of Key West. An evening lounging around sharing reactions wasn't what he had had in mind, but if that's what Vodkette wanted, that's what he'd put up with.

They picked the Tribune board, very mainstream, and filled with the usual drivel. Norbert kept his remarks fairly tame, so as not to offend, but he had his PS check the background of the bulletin board contributors. The readouts indicated that every political opinion originated in an expected financial benefit for the shopper who posted it. "I bet almost every opinion on this board is directly linked to the financial gain of the shopper who posted it," Norbert observed in a moment of wild abandon.

"Really!" exclaimed a startled Vodkette. Norbert suddenly remembered that she had done studies in social theory, and that he had probably put his foot in it. He quickly flashed her the background data his PS had been finding on each posting.

While she was looking it over, Norbert's System signalled a startling development: an arousal spike in the young lady, corresponding to his political observation. What had he done?

She smiled. "What made you check that out?" she asked.

"I dunno. It's like at work, I guess. If you're on the way up, you side with management. If you're up for retraining, you hate the place. Opinions are all rather predictable." His System red-flagged his comments: SOCIALLY RISKY.

But her arousal level spiked again, and plateaued higher than Norbert had ever encountered on a date. He ran a quick diagnostic, just to be sure.

She arched a sceptical eyebrow, which just showed above her lenses. "And I suppose you have some unpredictable opinions?"

"Oh, I dunno. I dunno," he stalled, desperately trying to subvocalize a search order for his wildest opinion.

His PS was way ahead of him. Before he could phrase the command, he was looking at a list of his five most original opinions, and their deviation value. Two of them were just errors of fact on his part (his old System hadn't caught them in time), and two more varied less than .45 from the norm. But at the top of the list stood an idea with a colossal deviation.

He swallowed. He took a chance. "I've often thought that we ought to be able to switch off our PSs. I've never heard anybody say that, and some people get on my case if I mention it."

She sat there stunned. His System told him that her System was going crazy refuting this remark. But her arousal level doubled.

Her personal distance markers dropped to zero, and her health history became available to his System for review.

Norbert never looked back.

When Norbert returned to his rooms that night he couldn't believe a number of things about the date. That she had liked him. That he had had a good time. That he had brought up the off-switch idea. That he had, against the advice of his System, allowed her to talk him into posting it for all to see.

His PS seemed insistent that he should examine the replies already coming in, and that he should prepare

to deal with repercussions. It certainly was a fine new System, with much more foresight than the 1200; and it didn't rely so much on that nagging voice in the ear.

But Norbert didn't want to think about politics and opinions tonight. He wanted to think about Vodkette, about her responses, about her shape, about the delicious way her rib-mount curved into the swell of her breast. And that is what he thought about until the System put him to sleep.

He awoke to find himself a famous revolutionary.

His System was so backlogged with urgent messages that he had to cancel work for the day. Norbert had never cancelled work before, but his System revealed that he was fully within his rights to do so.

There were thousands of responses to his political posting. Thousands. 16% were completely irrelevant; 12% confused; 61% irately opposed; 2% concerned about his mental health. But 8.63% agreed. Hundreds of shoppers had taken time out to make a point of agreeing with Norbert.

The feeling it gave him was so overwhelmingly wonderful that his PS had to intervene chemically.

After breakfast and coffoid, he looked at the urgent message traffic.

The counsellor at the installation hospital wanted him to come in for an appointment. The precinct bureaucrat urgently demanded a meeting. It looked ominous, and his bloodstream soon filled with anti-anxiety formulations. There were some dozen threats from angry fellow-shoppers. He had to have his PS explain some of the epithets.

He had been in trouble with Authority before, but no one had ever bothered to send him hate messages.

The most surprising thing was the long, long list of paying messages. Like other shoppers he made a few bucks each month scanning the advertisements offered to him, but it rarely seemed worth the money to sit through more than a few. Besides, the ads were so convincing that you usually bought the product, so what good was it?

But these messages had respectable fees. A long list of lawyers, publicists, writers and interviewers clamored for his business or co-operation. He spent most of the morning scanning their pitches, and in just three hours earned ten months' salary. Norbert had the uneasy feeling that he might soon need the cash.

After lunch, Norbert screwed up his courage and called the counsellor – the counsellor whom he had assured that the off switch would never be mentioned again. The counsellor's phone-male smiled and redirected his call to another office. A very slick managementwoman greeted him with effusive warmth.

"Shopper Kamdar! How good of you to return our message! Let me assure you that we will reimburse you for this call. Say five hundred dollars a minute?" Her pose suggested a willingness to pay more.

"Ah, sure. But I was supposed to talk to Counseling." Norbert suspected a run-around of some kind.

"Yes, well, we're sorry about that. A lot has changed since we sent that message. You may find this hard to believe, but we've been swamped with calls from shoppers just dying to know what PS you're currently using. You've probably experienced a touch of celebrity yourself since yesterday?"



"Yes, er. Yes, I have." What were they up to?

"Well, as a political celebrity you're entitled to realize the rewards of your position. We'd like to offer you an 8% commission on all the Jizmet 15s we sell in the next six months, if you'll let us release your System information to the public. We'd gladly raise that to 25% if you could find the time to tape an endorsement."

"Why that'd be just... Excuse me." His PS urgently flashed: GET AN AGENT across both lenses, as well as a prioritized list of those whose messages had been received that morning. "Sorry, but all this is a little sudden," he dutifully read from his optiprompter. "I'm sure something can be worked out. My lawyer will call to work out the details."

Just the briefest moue of disappointment was replaced by a broad smile of pleasure. She changed the subject. "We did notice one thing about your System that needs correction, and we'll gladly return half of the installation fee to cover your trouble. Ha, ha! The boys in the showroom sadly mis-read your character profile, I'm afraid. No one knew you were such an original, forceful young man. We've been hiding our light a bit, haven't we?"

"Well, perhaps a little..."

"So pardon us but we need to give you a more sophisticated repartee package, and damp down some of those annoying inhibition messages that less forthright individuals require. We can do that by remote, if you'll okay it?"

"Sure. I guess."

"Fine, then. And again our apologies." She hesitated. "Oh! I nearly forgot. The factory is designing that off switch you wanted as an option. We'll let you have an exclusive on that for sixty days, if you'll allow us to use you to market it afterwards. Good shopping!"

His PS-chosen lawyer was on his lens before her smile had even begun to fade out.

**W**hile his new agent worked out his contracts, Norbert entered further uncharted territory. He informed his employer that he just wouldn't be able to show up for the next two months, maybe longer. (To his surprise, they were understanding and willing to accommodate.) Then he began a careful screening of the social messages on the queue. Dozens of women had sent paying offers of their company. Only a few of them were professional escorts, the majority were single women with a taste for adventure; and adventure, in this case, meant Norbert!

His PS took a decidedly worldly approach to the situation, which told Norbert that the new software had already been transferred from the company. Norbert felt enormous gratitude to them for this new life. He would gladly endorse the Jizmet line. It was a fine product.

The interview programme would probably be Norbert's finest hour, if he didn't mess up. His PS, armed with a special celebrity-interview package, had been coaching him for days. They had practiced a dozen different gemphrases, the kind that get millions of replay requests, and all the royalties that go with it.

Their chief problem had been justifying his icono-

clastic action. Norbert's vagueness on politics and philosophy kept showing through, and he wasn't pig-headed enough to carry it off on emotional insistence alone. So they ended up with a consistently ambiguous set of prepared tactical responses, and a persistent uneasiness in the pit of Norbert's soul.

The presence of a live audience threw him. Forty people had paid large sums, of which he got 12%, to view the taping session in person. Norbert couldn't remember ever having been in one place with that many people in his life. His PS confirmed it; he never had.

The repetitious takes also bothered him. Most shoppers assumed that these programmes were taped in one seamless session. Actually, the interviewer asked the same questions over and over in different tones and moods, in order to elicit a variety of responses. Editing would patch them together later.

"Is it true that you get the famous off-switch installed tomorrow?" – Yes...

"What do you intend to do with your switch once you have it?" – I should think that was obvious...

"How long do you intend to leave your PS off?" – I'll have to see...

"What about crime, Shopper? What's to assure other shoppers that you won't go on a, what did they call it, skree?" – Spree. Perhaps you should invest in a Jizmet yourself. (PAUSE FOR STUDIO LAUGHTER, IF ANY) No, the switch is being installed under the condition that the GS can over-ride if any shopper's System detects me in criminal activity. I will have the power to try to commit a crime, just not the power to succeed...

"Why did you want an off-switch in the first place?" – It was just an excruciatingly original idea I had. (SMILE IN SELF-DEPRECATING FASHION)...

"Why do you think the shoppers of this world need these switches?" – I didn't say that other shoppers need them. I did say that the option should be available...

"But really, what purpose does an off-switch serve? What good is a PS that's not in use?" – The purpose of the off-switch is to turn the PS off. A shut-down PS serves no purpose but the purpose of waiting to serve. (DON'T USE THIS IF YOU THINK YOU'LL GARBLE IT)...

"But, Shopper Kamdar, I really don't think you've answered the question. Why put such a dangerous power in the hands of mere mortals?"

"For the tenth time..." Norbert caught himself, and tried to read his prompt. But the answers didn't mean anything to him, and he was angry and afraid. He ignored the prompt. "Because I'm a human and my PS is just a tool, and it's not right..." and he slumped in his chair, suddenly unable to speak at all – which his PS had decided was the best thing for everybody.

**T**he published version, which omitted the slumping at the end, soared up the charts. The commentator explained, "And so, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, Norbert Kamdar insists that it all comes down to 'who is to be the master,' and that's all."

In the end Norbert never spent a dime on legal fees.



The Shoppers' Defence Fund gladly staved off all the challenges from the bureaucrats and Jizmet's competitors. The courts managed to tie up installation of the switch for an entire month, but the publicity kept the interview selling and the Jizmet orders pouring in. By the day the switch was installed, Norbert was set up for life.

The "switch" could be activated by entering a code on a keypad mounted on his belt, next to the battery charging plug, followed by a subvocal command. If the PS suspected a suicide attempt, it would immobilize him instead of shutting off, and call for help. Otherwise it would wait until he hit the button again to turn back on.

Norbert carried it around for two days before he decided to give it a try. It seemed that every time he thought about it for very long his PS had to sedate him. He spent hours asleep, or in a torpor. What good is it if I can never use it, he thought. But finally, on the spur of the moment, he reached down and twisted the arming cover, flipped off the lid, tapped in the code, and then repeated the command phrase that appeared on his optiprompter. His lens went blank. After a few moments, even the cooling fan shut off.

It was astonishingly quiet without the sound-track. He hadn't realized that it was part of the PS, until now.

Both lenses began to steam up. It took him a while to understand that he wasn't going blind. But the light became otherworldly, and his room very fuzzy. He shouldn't have done this before he'd become familiar with his new rooms.

His head hurt! How can a head hurt on the inside? And he could hear his heart pounding. And his stomach felt very strange, and he began to taste something unpleasant near his throat... he reached down and turned the PS back on. It quickly reset and rushed to his aid.

But not in time to save the carpet.

Norbert waited a day to make sure he'd fully recovered from the experiment, and then decided to take a walk through the corridors. Almost immediately he ran into Howardi, who shouted a hearty, "How's shopping!"

"Always a sale. Yourself?"

"Never better. Say, Norb, the guys at work keep asking about you."

"Really?" Norbert found that idea odd. "Say hello for me."

"Of course. Hey, have you had any more weird ideas I can tell 'em about?"

"No," Norbert shook his head in self-deprecation. "I'm in enough trouble from just the one."

"You're a wild man, Norbert. A real stitch."

Norbert watched Howardi continue down the hall and turn a corner. INSINCERE, said the Jizmet 15.

Her smoky lenses spoke volumes, but her mouth said, "Have you used it?"

"Oh, yeah."

"What's it like?"

"Like nothing I've ever done before. I don't think most people would like it, though."

She reached across the table and stroked his arm. His twentieth date, in the twentieth restaurant, since

the interview. It seemed almost routine, now.

Her smoky lenses spoke volumes, but her mouth said, "How long do you leave it off?"

"Long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

"Long enough to show it who's boss."

His hundredth conquest in about a hundred tries. It really was seeming rather routine, now. Norbert considered cutting back to three a day.

Her smoky lenses spoke volumes. He excused himself and went for a long walk.

His PS guided him along routes he'd never taken, but he didn't take much in. Despite the mood-levellers his System was pumping, the halls and galleries all looked the same. He thought back to Vodkette, who had helped start all this. His first conquest. What was she doing now?

SAME EMPLOYMENT. SAME SHOPPING PATTERNS. There was a note reminding him that her System was probably hopelessly incompatible with his Jizmet. She would bore him now, after all the sophisticated, upscale shoppers he'd been dating since.

That realization made him a tiny bit sad, a tiny bit lonely.

By mid-afternoon he found himself on the edge of the nature park. He decided to explore it. The trees and shrubs here were allowed to grow freely, unless they interfered with the pathways. Few shoppers came here and Norbert could see why. The confusion of shapes and densities seemed quite odd, and the dead leaves and branches accumulating on the ground was somewhat disturbing. Still, his software gave him permission to continue.

At first he stayed on the concrete walkways, which were lined with stone lanterns and other pointless artefacts. The PS offered a series of lectures on their significance, but he declined. Impulsively he stepped onto an unpaved pathway, and during his first few steps switched off his System.

Again the stunning silence in the absence of the sound-track, the pounding of his heart and the rising nausea. The grass under his feet felt very irregular, like a poorly designed pile carpet, and made walking unsteady. He stopped, and tried to control the panic that mounted in his mind. The lenses steamed up, first the right, then the left. He reached up to his face and, for the first time he could remember, unsnapped the lenspiece and flipped it up.

His eyes, unused to the raw air, filled with tears. He could barely keep them open, the impulse to blink was so strong.

The vertigo became overwhelming, and he fell to his hands and knees. The unfamiliar feel of grass and earth under his hands distracted him momentarily, and allowed him to fight off the nausea. This is how his ancestors had once lived, in the wild, under the trees, listening to the song-birds. How could they stand it, he wondered; how could they shop, feeling like this?

He heard footsteps rapidly approaching.

"Are you all right?"

Norbert reached up unsteadily and restarted his PS, then flipped down the lenspiece. He gestured



unsteadily for patience, though he knew his interrogator's System would be monitoring his rapid return to normal. Then he sensed two people squatting down beside him, and his PS said, "Park rangers."

"Shopper? Do you need assistance?"

Norbert, his head clearing, sat back on his heels and read through the last of his tears, "Certainly not. But thank you. I was just having a rather...extraordinary experience."

The PS cleared him to stand, so he did, brushing himself off, and smiling his best enigmatic-#3 said, "Yes...that was quite extraordinary. Good day, gentleshoppers."

As he walked back toward the concrete he heard one exclaim, "I tell you, it's him!"

"Imagine that. Right out here!"

**H**owardi had left messages, as had the bureaucrat's office. The Jizmet sales people left messages, more and more urgent as the evening wore on. Norbert realized that the General System probably told them about the incident in the park. With the new switch going on sale in a few days, they might be panic-stricken. His PS urged him to return their calls.

He was right. They wanted to know "if he had experienced any difficulties" with the new switch.

"No," he told them. "But it's not for the timid."

They liked that. They quoted him in their ads.

For a few days afterward Norbert stayed home, cancelling all his dates and postponing his investment counselling sessions. His Jizmet supported very conservative financial software, and tended to veto all the schemes that were proposed. Besides, he didn't really need more money.

He wasn't sure what he did need. He did some shopping, but the salesreps annoyed him. He took in some games, but his teams didn't inspire him the way they once had. The flicks couldn't compete with his own sex life of recent weeks.

Norbert was lonely.

He considered several new hobbies, but he knew that they weren't the answer. He tried a couple of the banter-lines, but the interesting people on them were all computer-generated; the rest were shoppers like himself, who didn't know what they were looking for. Finally, he decided to keep one of his dinner dates. Back to the sugar mines, he thought.

**A**rtemia did not have her lenses set to "smoky," nor did she ask about the switch before the first course of paste was finished. She inquired about his interests and reading preferences, and seemed a bit unsure of herself when she discovered that he had none.

Norbert stuck strictly to the suggested comments, feeling utterly lost with this woman. He had dated the educated classes before, but they never seemed to stray much from their software – the conversations being carefully scripted until simple curiosity inevitably led to the same questions, the same responses, and bed.

Until now, Norbert had never quite understood how artificial those conversations had been.

He recklessly strayed from the script. "Excuse me, could we just talk about you for a while?"

She paused. "I suppose you want to know why I decided to ask for a date?"

"Not really. I'd just like to know what you really... what you're like." IF YOU DON'T MIND. "If you don't mind?"

Artemia reviewed her likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests, for the most part reciting the pre-date resumé her System had provided to his. Growing bored, he asked for elaboration, and she responded with complicated details. The Jizmet barraged him with definitions and explanations in both earspeakers, while filling both lenses with charts and graphs. He had to be prompted to realize that she had stopped talking some time before and expected a reply.

"Pardon me?" he tried.

"I said...well, never mind." She frowned. "You're not really very well educated, are you? I didn't know quite what to expect, but you're not really much like your pop-image, are you?"

A long silence fell between them, and Norbert considered the RUDENESS: OFF SCALE blinking in his left lens, and the series of pointed replies scrolling down his right.

He took a deep breath and shut off his PS. Her System must have informed her, because she immediately sat quite straight.

"No," he said. "No, I'm not very well educated. I'm not very smart, either. I just asked a very silly question while I was shopping one day, and all this..." He gestured vaguely, not even sure she was still there, beyond his foggy lenses. "All this...happened. I'm sorry." He switched back on.

She was still there. She slowly sat back in her chair, and her mouth dropped open. His prompt signalled STRONG EMOTIONAL RESPONSE. CONFUSED.

"You shut it off," she said. "You answered my question without a prompter."

He shrugged.

She leaned forward, "I don't think I've ever been given an unprompted answer to anything."

RESPECT INDICATED.

"Well, Shopper Kamdar," she said, smiling in a way he would always remember, "You might just have possibilities..."

EMOTIONAL COMPLICATIONS PENDING.

**T**he switch proved quite a popular option for several years before fading into disfavour and oblivion, though not until the royalties made a fortune for the newlyweds. Norbert never used his again, except for brief moments – just long enough to whisper in Artemia's ear that he loved her. This often punctuated the lessons they took together in a most delightful, if not instructive, way.

Artemia never did buy a switch for her own System. And though their friends and acquaintances often sported the device, the question of actually trying it never seemed to come up in conversation. "Someday we ought to ask Jizmet how often they were used," she used to say – but it never seemed all that important.

See note about the author on page 15.



# Burning the Motherhood Statements

## Greg Egan interviewed by Jeremy Byrne and Jonathan Strahan

**I**n 1983 Norstrilia Press published *An Unusual Angle*, the first novel by a very young writer called Greg Egan. The book made little impact and, despite the publication of several stories in *Interzone* and various Australian anthologies between 1983 and 1989, Egan remained largely unfamiliar to readers. During 1990 a number of increasingly mature and well-written stories began to appear in *Interzone* and *Asimov's*, helping to establish Egan's reputation as a writer to watch. Egan's second novel, *Quarantine*, was published to positive reviews last year and he is currently at work on a third. We are proud to present the first interview with this important new writer.

*Greg, little biographical detail about you is generally available, other than that you were born in Perth [Australia] in 1961 and worked in the Medical Physics Department of a Perth hospital. What can you tell us about your history, particularly as it influenced your writing?*

From the age of about six I'd always imagined that I'd end up working as some kind of professional scientist, and I did do a BSc, majoring in mathematics, at the University of Western Australia. What side-tracked me wasn't writing: it was amateur film-making. I became obsessed with that in my last year of high school. Don't ask me why, but I decided to make a half-hour Super 8 film based on an absurdist play about international diplomacy, "Out of the Flying Pan" by British playwright David Campton. I paid a thousand dollars for the film rights – which I saved up by working on a milk truck for a couple of years. It was an insane waste of money: the film was technically abysmal even for Super 8, and in any case I had no prospect of ever earning a cent from it. I knew all that, but I went ahead and did it anyway.

Then I made an hour-long 16 mm film – from my own screenplay, this time. It was a pretty heavy-handed satire about a referendum being held to decide whether or not the human race should deliberately annihilate itself. The cast consisted of long-suffering friends and family members, and I was

the entire crew. We shot it without sound, and post-synched all the dialogue, which was a nightmare for the actors. Anyway, it cost so much that the only way to finish it was to stop studying after the BSc and work full-time, so I did that for a year. Then I used the film to apply to the Australian Film and Television School in Sydney. I lasted about four weeks there before I realized how much I'd hate working in the film industry. I didn't have the commitment to spend 10 or 20 years slogging away in the hope of eventually directing feature films. So I quit.

I spent six months unemployed – this was in 1983, at the tail end of the last recession – writing several bad novels, then finally got a job as a computer programmer with a medical research institute attached to a Sydney hospital. I stayed there for four-and-a-half years. All my formal education was in the physical sciences, so I was lucky to get a chance to hang around doctors and biochemists, picking things up by osmosis.

I moved back to Perth at the end of 1987, and since then I've been alternating between stretches of full-time writing, and programming jobs. I've been lucky; the same hospital has employed me twice so far on fixed-term contracts, which suits me perfectly. That way there's no trauma about getting back to writing – no need to abruptly resign from a job which you promised at the interview to do for the next 30 years. The contract runs out, and that's it.

*The importance of film in your life is something I imagine few of your readers know about. Does it still interest you? Has your experience with it been an influence on your writing?*

Film-making has pretty much vanished from my thoughts; I see no prospect of having the time or money to return to it as a hobby. These days I'd probably get involved in computer animation and video – but if I got hooked on that I wouldn't get any writing done, so I'm deliberately not even tinkering on my Amiga. Film-making is central to *An Unusual Angle*, and I wrote a story in 1981 called "Tangled Up," about a film-maker lost in an infinite regress

of films-within-films. It hasn't been a theme in any of my later work, though.

*In Bruce Gillespie's SF Commentary in 1989 you mentioned taking a year off to concentrate on your writing. This was obviously one of the longer "stretches of full-time writing." Does this technique – commitment to your writing to the extent of putting "normal work" aside – actually work? Did anything significant come out of it?*

I spent most of 1990 writing *Quarantine*, the first novel I've really been happy with. So yes, it did work. I'm in awe of anyone who can write novels while holding down a full-time job; I just don't have the stamina. Also, I'm a pretty slow writer, both in terms of pages per hour-at-the-keyboard, and in terms of thinking-time to writing-time ratios. I can only really make progress on a novel once I'm thinking about it very nearly every waking minute.

*Who do you consider your literary influences? Reviewers have noted similarities to J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick. Are these valid?*

I read a lot of science fiction in my very early teens: Dick, Ballard, Delany, Bester, Aldiss, Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Ellison, Le Guin. I read all these classics without knowing they were classics, and absorbed them all so thoroughly that a lot of the ideas they dealt with feel more like "general knowledge" to me than something I can trace to a particular source.

My memories are clearer a bit later on; by the time I was about 15 I was heavily into Kurt Vonnegut and Larry Niven. That might sound like an odd combination, but when Niven and/or Pournelle put that infamous scene with Vonnegut in *Hell* into *Inferno*, I just assumed they were sending up their arrogant narrator. For a while my two favourite books were probably *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Protector*. Niven really was the cutting edge of hard sf for several years.

I drifted away from sf in my late teens and early 20s. I read a lot of David Ireland, Joseph Heller, Günter Grass, Gabriel García Márquez, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon. It wasn't until Greg Bear's *Blood Music* that sf really grabbed me again.



I admire J.G. Ballard's work enormously, but I don't think it's influenced my writing. He has reality break down in a very distinctive, dream-like way; if it makes sense, it's in terms of an invented dream-logic. Whereas I'm usually trying to tear away the surface of things while remaining as scrupulously rational and scientific as possible, to the point of irritating some people. In Ballard's work, abandoning reason leads to all kinds of strange insights and transformations. It's beautiful, and mesmerizing. But I don't believe the world actually works like that.

Philip Dick made the whole nature-of-reality, nature-of-identity, nature-of-humanity sub-genre his own. Anytime anyone else goes near it, Dick's usually been there first; the only modern writer I know of who pre-dates him is Luigi Pirandello, who touched on some similar themes. So it's impossible for me to write about certain ideas without being aware that I'm on "Philip Dick territory"; that's an occupational hazard of writing metaphysical science fiction. I don't apologize for trespassing, though – he was a giant, but I don't think he exhausted the themes, and I doubt that anyone ever will.

We should discuss the philosophical side of your writing a bit later, but first: inspiration. What inspires you to write? We've already covered film – does music, for instance, play a role? Are the influences for particular pieces strong and identifiable and can you recall any specifics?

Most of my "inspiration" is very transparent. "The Cutie" was triggered by reading that childless adults in the US were buying themselves Cabbage Patch dolls – and that one couple had even had an exorcism performed on theirs. I'm still not sure if that was apocryphal or not. "The Moral Virologist" was a fairly direct response to religious fundamentalists blathering on about AIDS being God's instrument; I thought someone should point out that, even on their own terms, this was a blasphemous obscenity. I suppose that story was also guided by the example of "creation science"; believing in doctrine is bad enough, but if you start trying to reason from it, you churn out an ever-growing list of absurdities which you also have to believe. "The Vat" was a cross between *When Harry Met Sally* and an essay in *Nature* by Erwin Chargaff, one of the pioneers of molecular biology, in which he warned of the possibility of a "molecular Auschwitz" where human embryos would be made as an industrial commodity, an intermediate step in the manufacture of certain enzymes and hormones.

Music is just as important to me, on

a personal level, as literature, but any influence it has on my writing is usually pretty tangential. I did write a story called "Worthless" for *In Dreams* – a recent anthology on "the culture of the 7-inch single." I'm a big fan of The Smiths, so the first idea that occurred to me when I heard about the anthology was to try to write a kind of sf equivalent of a Smiths song – a story with the same ambivalent attitude to the

after I'd written the story, though.

With the central idea for *Quarantine*, I'd been aware for about 15 years that some physicists believed that only conscious observers "collapsed the wave" – that it was a biological or metaphysical property of being human. I was daydreaming about that when it finally occurred to me that taking the idea seriously could lead to some very bizarre conclusions. I spent



whole idea of worthlessness, half-embracing it as a positive thing. That was a one-off, though. The only other story where music played a major role was "Beyond the Whistle Test," in which scientists use neural maps to design advertising jingles which you literally can't forget. "Closer" may or may not have been inspired by a line in my favourite Lloyd Cole song ("Four Flights Up" – the line is: "Must you tell me all your secrets when it's hard enough to love you knowing nothing"). The connection only occurred to me

about a month reading about the quantum measurement problem, catching up with all the competing theories – which had to turn out to be wrong in the novel, so they're barely mentioned. Roger Penrose's quantum gravity theory is so beautiful that it deserves to be right...but the idea that the human brain alone might be responsible for the collapse made a much better story.

Before discussing *Quarantine* – your latest novel – it might be interesting to discuss your first – *An Unusual Angle*,



from 1983 – which you mentioned earlier. What can you tell us about it and how do you feel about it ten years on?

For the benefit of those readers who have no idea what the book is about – most of them, I hope – *An Unusual Angle* is a kind of eccentric teenage loner story with surreal elements. The narrator literally has a movie camera inside his skull. I wrote it when I was 16, although I revised it slightly just before it was published, six years later.

It was very big-hearted of Norstrilia Press to publish it, but it didn't do them, or me, much good. They blew their money. I laboured under the mistaken impression that I could now write publishable fiction; it took me a while to realize that that simply wasn't true. *Quarantine* is the eighth novel I've written, and the first publishable one. That *An Unusual Angle* was published at all was really just a glitch.

You say *Quarantine* is your eighth novel. An old letter we've just seen refers to *The Flight Of Sirius* as a novel forthcoming in 1985. What happened to it?

Norstrilia Press were going to publish it, then changed their minds because it turned out that they wouldn't get Literature Board funding for it – it was hard sf, unlike *An Unusual Angle*, so they couldn't pass it off as literature. I was very disappointed at the time, but I'm glad, now, that it turned out that way. It was a very badly written novel, and the central idea – using the gravitational attraction of collapsed objects to let spacecraft accelerate at thousands of gees without squashing the passengers – had already been used by Charles Sheffield, as I later discovered.

As your first novel from a major publisher, *Quarantine* is obviously an important milestone in your career. What can you tell us about how you wrote it? Did it develop out of your short work?

*Quarantine* took me about twelve months to write, starting early in 1990. I had a few breaks to write short stories, but other than that it pretty much monopolized my life until it was finished. It's not an expansion of a shorter work, although I did borrow ideas from some of my stories: the "priming" drugs used by cops in "The Caress" to prepare themselves for duty have been replaced by neural modifications which do the same thing – and the neural modifications themselves are used in much the same fashion as the neural implants of "Axiomatic" and "Fidelity." There are echoes of "The Infinite Assassin," but that story wasn't the seed for *Quarantine*; I actually wrote it half-way through writing the novel, so the influence was the

other way round.

Is *Quarantine* part of any self-consistent "universe" where you intend to set more stories? Do you see the development of such common settings as useful (given the commonality of "The Extra," "Closer," "Learning to Be Me" etc.)?

I'm not attracted to common settings at all. The last thing I want to do is create a future history and tie my hands by having to conform to it. All that the three stories you mention really have in common are some items of technology.

Obviously there's a lot of work involved in writing a novel. You say you spent a month on the quantum measurement problem in *Quarantine*. How much research do you usually do for your fiction, be it short or novel-length?

That varies enormously. Near-future biotechnology stories usually mean the most work for me, because they have to make a reasonable amount of sense in terms of current knowledge and current technology. Whereas with something like "Reification Highway," full of speculative metaphysics and set thousands of years in the future, there's not much point comparing anything in the story to present-day scientific orthodoxy.

In any case, I usually spend much longer just thinking things through than I spend on actual library research. I don't mean plotting the story, which is yet another stage; I mean trying to map out all the implications of the central idea. In *Quarantine* there's not a great deal that a physicist would call quantum mechanics; most of the book comes from taking a single premise about the measurement problem, and then exploring what it would mean if the results could manifest themselves on the level of everyday life.

A number of critics – amongst them Adelaide academic Michael Tolley in *Eidolon* – have complained about the sections of *Quarantine* where you explain quantum mechanical principles etc., claiming these passages disrupt the flow of the novel. Are the criticisms valid and do you think you could have done it any other way?

I think the only changes I could have made would have been a matter of fine-tuning, rather than a completely different approach. I wanted the middle of the novel to be a time when the narrator had a chance to learn about the physics and metaphysics of his situation – and to think through some of the consequences – before things became too frantic for deliberations

like that to be at all plausible. I can see why some reviewers would have preferred less theoretical discussion – but I wanted the events that followed to make sense to readers ranging from people who'd never even heard of Schrödinger's Cat, through to people who were familiar with all the latest debates about quantum metaphysics. If I'd cut out too much explanatory material, some people might have been left floundering.

I do wish I could have handled that section more smoothly – Michael Tolley rightly pointed out that some of the dialogue is pretty clumsy – but I still think that the basic structure was the right choice.

Do you consider yourself primarily a novelist or a short story writer? Which length do you prefer and which do you feel you're more successful with?

I hope I'm in transition from being a short story writer to being a novelist as well, but with so few published novels I'm not really qualified to call myself a novelist yet. What I like most about short stories is that it's possible to keep everything important about them in your head at the same time; human working memory – or mine, at least – just can't do that with a novel.

I've been writing about seven or eight short stories a year for the past few years, and I'm not going to be able to keep that up as well as writing novels, but I've probably reached the stage where I'd be at a loss for that many suitable ideas anyway.

Do you see yourself as a "professional" writer? Do you live exclusively from your writing?

I'm writing full-time at present, and it's been 18 months since I last did programming work. It's too early to say I've quit my day job forever though; I'm just taking it as it comes. I'm hoping to stretch the money out for at least another year: long enough to write another novel after *Permutation City*, which is the book I'm working on at present.

Although you're primarily a writer of fiction, are you interested in other ways of expressing your ideas and opinions? If film-making is dead, does critical writing hold any attraction? What about essays or popular science writing?

Fanzine movie reviews are about my limit as far as "critical work" goes. As for popular science, these days you really need to be on the cutting edge of research – in person – to compete. Richard Dawkins, Roger Penrose, Paul Davies, Stephen Hawking. I'm just not in the running.



Your fiction style has been called "ideas-based" and even "plot-bound," concentrating more on the story than on the characters or setting. Is this a deliberate choice? Is this the kind of fiction you personally prefer to read? Is it even fair comment?

"Ideas-based" is a fair comment, and I certainly try to choose ideas that are strong enough to be worth writing a story around. I don't deliberately neglect the characters, though, so if they're badly drawn that's a failure, not a choice. Settings I often do deliberately neglect, at least in short stories; if the setting is a near-contemporary western city, it usually makes no difference where it is, unless there's some vital plot point hanging on the geography. I'd rather have the reader imagine his or her home town. I only go into settings in detail if they're exotic, like the city in "Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies."

I think my stories work best when there's a powerful reason for the idea to be important to the central character. Most of my characters are a bit obsessive, and a bit fucked-up – but I'd rather that than have them scrupulously bland and ordinary for the sake of it. In "Axiomatic" the whole notion of the physical basis of morality is crucial to the narrator's problem. And in "The Safe-Deposit Box" and "The Infinite Assassin" the central idea of the story has completely shaped the central character's life. You could hardly consider the character in "The Safe-Deposit Box" in isolation from the idea that he wakes up every morning in a different body.

A complicating factor is that a lot of my work is aimed at undermining orthodox ideas about personal identity, so it's hardly the place you'd expect to find the usual 19th-century literary conventions about characterization being honoured. Emma Bovary couldn't pop out and buy the neural implant from "Fidelity."

None of that's meant to be an excuse for poor writing – and I know I have a long way to go in a lot of areas. I'm sure I've had stories published which have been successful because the ideas were strong enough for readers to forgive a degree of clumsiness in the style and the characterization. Obviously, I'd rather have everything work together. I want to improve on those fronts – without sacrificing the ideas.

As for my own preferences, I'd rather read Lucius Shepard than a typical Analog story, any day. But it doesn't have to be a stark choice like that; there are writers like Greg Bear, Michael Swanwick, Bruce Sterling, and others, who give you the best of both worlds.

Are you interested in writing in areas other than "Hard sf"?

I've had three horror stories published ["Mind Vampires," "Scatter My Ashes" and "Neighbourhood Watch"], and I wrote a vampire novel called *The Effects of Feeding* back in 1988, which wasn't good enough to be published. I had a lot of trouble suspending disbelief for the duration of that novel; the horror ended up rationalized, although not in the Stableford or Simmons mould. I might write short horror again, if I get a strong enough idea.

David Hartwell of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* wrote an editorial recently in which he laments the shift in the genre towards fantasy, horror and "mainstream influenced" writing and away from "hard sf." He even speculates that "Science Fiction could end this decade." Science itself could be seen to be becoming "softer," particularly with regards to fundamental physics and the ethical dilemmas of advancing biotechnology. Has this influenced your work, and do you see a shift in the work of others?

**It's now possible to write, with a fair degree of scientific rigour, about anything from the technology of rewiring your personal morality, to the possibility of manufacturing new universes. Hard sf doesn't mean ignoring the human consequences, or the ethics, of any of these things – it just means not ignoring the facts.**

Science fiction isn't going to end this decade. Hundreds of people, at the very least, will keep on writing relatively hard sf, although I have no idea what will happen to its marketability.

Science itself is becoming more relevant to almost every field of human activity. Developments like chaos theory and complexity theory make whole new classes of problems amenable to scientific treatment. Results in fundamental physics, like the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen correlation, make questions previously thought of as untestable and purely metaphysical accessible to experiments. Quantum cosmology impinges on supposedly religious issues – but that makes those issues scientific issues; it doesn't transform the science into mysticism. Neurobiology is reaching the point where the neural systems responsible for all kinds of highly specific mental activities are being identified and understood.

So I see science as becoming

broader, not "softer" – and this broadening certainly influences my work, and the work of plenty of other writers. It's now possible to write, with a fair degree of scientific rigour, about anything from the technology of rewiring your personal morality, to the possibility of manufacturing new universes. Hard sf doesn't mean ignoring the human consequences, or the ethics, of any of these things – it just means not ignoring the facts.

In his *Eidolon* review of *Quarantine*, Michael Tolley notes the apparent similarity between the philosophically mechanistic views of your central protagonist Nick Stavrianos and your own. Certainly work like "The Vat" might predispose one to think he's on the right track. Ethics, morality and philosophy in general seem such an important part of your writing; do you hold any particularly strong personal views or convictions in that regard? If so, how have you come to them? Are there any grand themes you'd like to explore?

"The Vat" was sledge-hammer irony, but I've had no feedback at all from readers, so I don't know how people took it. I nearly had someone working in the loading bay where they packed the foetal by-products singing "Dehumanize yourself! Dehumanize yourself!" ... having misheard the words of the old Police song. Maybe I should have kept that in. But the point of the story was that it's going to take a considerable effort to reconcile the insights of some areas of science with certain values we may want to preserve, and certain illusions we hold dear. I don't believe six-day-old foetuses are sentient – but it would still be deeply corrupting to treat them like so much chemical feedstock.

So – I don't know if this counts as a "grand theme" or not, but one thing I'm trying to do is explore clashes like that, between facts and values – without taking the easy way out and pretending that the facts can be ignored. I don't want to write motherhood statements – feel-good stories that cave in at the end and do nothing but confirm everything you ever wanted to believe; I've done that in the past, and it's insidious. Stories like that should be burned. If I'm certain of anything, it's that understanding how the real world works – how human brains actually function, how morality and emotions and decisions actually arise – is essential to any kind of ethical stance which will make sense in the long term. If that gets me branded "mechanistic," so be it.

I was raised as a Christian, and I still retain a lot of the values of Christianity. The trouble with basing values on religions, though, is that the premises of most of them are pure wishful thinking; you either have to refuse to



scrutinize those premises – take them on faith, declare that they “transcend logic” – or reject them. As Paul Davies has said, most Christian theologians have retreated from all the things that their religion supposedly asserts; they take a much more “modern” view than the average believer. But by the time you’ve “modernized” something like Christianity – starting off with “Genesis was all just poetry” and ending up with “Well, of course there’s no such thing as a personal God” – there’s not much point pretending that there’s anything religious left. You might as well come clean and admit that you’re an atheist with certain values, which are historical, cultural, biological, and personal in origin, and have nothing to do with anything called God.

I think the social conscience of the future lies with organizations of people who can agree on some basic values, getting together for a specific purpose – Amnesty International, for example – rather than groups with elaborate doctrines which attempt to embrace the whole of creation. I’m deeply suspicious of the trend towards “ethics centres” full of “professional ethicists”; most of these people are escaped clergymen and/or academic philosophers.

What is your most successful work – not in terms of financial reward, but from a “personal satisfaction” angle? Why?

“Learning to Be Me.” It was a very simple story, but I think it did exactly what I’d intended it to do.

Obviously you’re not alone in that opinion, given the reception the story has received (positive critical comment, Recommended Reading listings, reprintings etc.). In fact, by any standards, you’ve been very successful generally over the past few years. How did you go about establishing yourself as a writer both here and internationally? For instance, did your success in the UK help penetration into the US? What barriers to publication did you encounter? Has being Australian helped or hindered your career thus far?

How did I go about establishing myself? I never had any elaborate strategies or plans. I wrote a large amount of crap, and my writing improved, very slowly. Everything else has been a matter of luck.

In terms of the particular history of when things started going right for me, I suppose there were three turning points. The first was selling “Mind Vampires” to *Interzone* in 1986. It was Bruce Gillespie who suggested that I send stories to *Interzone*, so I have him to thank for that. Horror turned out to be a detour, but *Interzone* turned out to

be crucial. I sent them more horror, and they rejected most of it, but they gave me some feedback and encouragement. The second turning point was “Learning to Be Me,” which, as you’ve said, was well-received, and helped me raise my expectations of the standard I should be aiming for. The third big break was *Quarantine*. Both Peter Robinson, the agent who sold it for me, and Deborah Beale, who bought it for *Legend* and edited it, approached me initially because of stories I’d had published in *Interzone*.

As for “penetrating” the US...selling to *Interzone* definitely made me feel more confident about submitting to Asimov’s, but I don’t believe it was a factor in the sale itself. I think Asimov’s just accepted the first good story I sent them.

The only “barrier to publication” was my own bad writing. It’s true that a lot of my very early work didn’t fit comfortably into any genre – but the reason most of it remains unpublished is that it was poorly written. Being Australian has never made a difference, either way.

It may seem provincial or parochial, but this country seems obsessed with its own national consciousness just at the moment. Do you feel that there is anything uniquely Australian about your writing, and is that important to you?

No. I mean, everyone’s affected by the particular mix of cultures, and the particular geography, of the place they were raised in, and live in, so of course I’d be a different person if I’d been born elsewhere. But a hundred other factors come first. I certainly don’t believe in such a thing as a “national identity”; the phrase is an oxymoron. Like most countries, Australia possesses thousands of subcultures, quite apart from any question of ethnicity. One of those subcultures consists of people who consider their nationality a vital part of their self-image; that’s their right, but they should stop deluding themselves that everyone else thinks the same way. Nothing’s more ridiculous than talking about the “unique Australian character” – unless it’s talking about the “mystical qualities of the Australian landscape.”

What are your feelings on being published locally? Is it a useful testing ground, or a waste of time?

In theory, I try to sell every story to *Interzone* or Asimov’s first, and if it’s rejected I try the small-press magazines, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* included. In practice, I sent “The Extra” to *Eidolon* first because it happened to be available when the magazine started up and was calling for submissions. And I sent “The Moat” straight to

*Aurealis* because I knew there’d be people reading *Aurealis* who never read the overseas magazines. “The Moat,” by the way, I don’t see as “uniquely Australian” – xenophobia is universal – but having set it in Australia, I thought I might as well try to get it read in Australia.

Would a move overseas help your career? Would you do it if necessary?

I don’t see any need to be physically closer to my publishers. I have a terrific agent in London; the whole point of agents is not having to be there yourself. If I was going to move to another country for the sake of my writing – in the hope of jolting my imagination – it wouldn’t be the UK or the US; both are far too familiar. At present, though, my prospects of having the time or money to travel anywhere, even for a couple of weeks, are nil.

In your short-fiction career you’ve been published almost exclusively by David Pringle of *Interzone* and Gardner Dozois of Asimov’s (and *The Year’s Best SF*). How much have these editors shaped your writing? How important is the relationship between the writer and the editor? Is your lack of appearance in the other major venues your choice?

David Pringle did help steer me away from horror; when he bought “The Cutie” – my first sf story for *Interzone* – he made it clear that he thought I was heading in the right direction. These days, though, most of the feedback I get from him, and from Gardner Dozois, is about the quality of the stories. I think they’re both more interested in making sure that things are well-written than in influencing people’s choice of themes.

I used to submit diligently to all the major magazines, but *Interzone* and Asimov’s kept accepting things, and everyone else kept turning them down, so it seemed like a waste of postage to keep it up. I could eat for a year on a sale to *Omni*, though, so I still try them now and then. And Ellen Datlow writes the nicest rejections in the business.

Do you feel part of any concerted “movement” in the genre? You’ve been linked with Ian R. MacLeod by one commentator; is that a valid comparison? Do you feel an affinity with any current writers?

I don’t think you could find two writers more different than Ian MacLeod and myself; all we have in common is that we’ve both been successful at about the same time, in the same magazines. I do feel a certain sense of generational solidarity with the other *Interzone* writers who’ve appeared in



recent years. But I only know these people through their work, and their work certainly isn't similar enough to constitute a "movement."

*Do you correspond with other writers about the genre? Do you read the periodicals? Which ones in particular?*

I don't really "correspond" with any writers; I've exchanged brief letters with some people on specific matters. I read *Locus*, *SF Chronicle*, *Australian Science Fiction Writers' News*, *Thyme*, and the SFWA's *Bulletin and Forum*. There's valuable stuff buried in all of them.

*What is your opinion of awards? How important are Readers' Polls, do you think? Do they advance an author's career significantly? Do you care more about popular or critical acclaim?*

Any sign that there are people who like something I've written is welcome, whether it's a good rating in a poll, or a good review. I try not to over-analyse anything encouraging, though; I just take it as good news and leave it at that. The whole practice of ranking works of fiction as if they were one-dimensional objects is pernicious, but it's not going to go away, so there's not much point getting worked up about it.

*The critical comment you've received, while principally positive – and occasionally effusive – has been mixed. Do you pay attention? Do you read it at all?*

I read all the reviews I'm aware of. There may be people iron-willed enough to pick up a magazine and flip right past a review of their own work, but I'm certainly not one of them.

Do I pay attention to criticism? Yes, if it rings true. I've had cases where the reviewer has understood exactly what I was trying to do, and pointed out where I've failed in a way that made perfect sense to me. When that happens, it's priceless. And short of that, almost any honest, considered opinion is useful to some extent.

The worst kind of review is where the reviewer loathes the work, but then bends over backwards trying to sound "fair" and "balanced" – when the honest thing would have been to write a dismissive one-liner and to leave it at that. Dorothy Parker's review of one of

the Winnie the Pooh books was: "Constant weedah thwew up!" The *New Yorker's* review of *Dances With Wolves* was: "They should have called him *Plays With Camera*." In science fiction, if someone hates what you've done, you get 12 paragraphs of constipated invective, peppered with occasional compliments dredged up to make it clear how "balanced" the review is.

*Mystery writer Sue Grafton has said that she spends nine months writing a novel, two months promoting it and one month off. Could you see yourself working like that? How do you feel about the role of the writer as an entertainer, both in print and in person?*

If I can make a living as a writer in the long term, that will be nice, but I'm not going to slit my wrists in despair if I have to do other things to pay the bills. I'm not going to climb onto the book-a-year treadmill for the sake of financial security.

"Entertainment" is very much a matter of taste. I was bored witless by 95 per cent of *Total Recall*, because the producers stuffed it full of car chases and disembowelments in the hope of keeping the audience "entertained." The parts I found most enjoyable – the Philip Dick ontological riffs – were few and far between. So I certainly try to be entertaining in print, but I don't feel obliged to do car chases.

As for being entertaining in person, I'm not a public speaker. That's not my role, and it's not something I'd do well in any case. I had a job interview once where I said so little that the man who was conducting the interview – a very pompous professor of immunology – told me I was illiterate. (What he meant was inarticulate, of course, but it didn't seem wise to point that out to him.) So the day it becomes obligatory for writers to go out and cultivate fandom, like politicians on the hustings, they'd better put it in the publishing contracts so I can refuse to sign them.

*That's an understandable reaction; a piece of writing must surely succeed or fail on its own merits, regardless of the salesmanship of its author. But isn't it in the best interests of the author to try to promote the work to the public, through interviews, signings, even appearances?*

Not to mention life-sized cardboard cut-outs of Madonna. I don't know. Like I've said, I'd do it badly, and I also think the value of it is overrated. I've bought books by my own favourite authors for years without knowing the first thing about them, other than what they've written. It's all down to reviews, past works, and word of mouth. I believe there's a large component of the sf readership who don't even know – let alone care – about all the bullshit that goes on. Of the people I know who read science fiction, the majority have no connection whatsoever to fandom, and they're quite oblivious to whether or not Writer X has had his photo in *Locus* every month, and juggled armadillos while filk-singing at the latest Worldcon.

*Finally, what's coming in the future from Greg Egan? Your Century/Legend deal included a collection and two novels, the first being Quarantine. How are the others coming?*

My next book is likely to be the third novel, *Permutation City*. I'm still working on it; the deadline is looming. It's an expansion of a novelette called "Dust," published in *Asimov's* last year, which took the possibility of conscious software for granted, and ended up concluding that the ordering of events in space and time is purely in the eye of the beholder. A simulation of a person in a virtual reality could be chopped up into a million pieces and run backwards on a million different computers scattered all over the planet – and the simulated person wouldn't know the difference. *Permutation City* assumes that this is equally true for everyone, and pushes the idea to its logical conclusion.

The short story collection will come after that, probably in 1994. The working title of the collection is *Unstable Orbits*.

*Well Greg, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed; I'm sure our readers will appreciate this glimpse of the man behind the name. We wish you the very best with your writing.*

The above interview first appeared in the Australian small-press magazine *Eidolon*, Summer 1993. We are grateful to its editors for permission to reprint it here.



# The Four-Thousand-Year-Old Boy

Lawrence Dyer

**“W**hen I was small,” Metheus said, “in the springtime I would lie beside the Euphrates and watch the mayflies rising from the reed-beds.” His voice was hollow inside the glass walls of the giant terrarium.

Through the glass Ana saw his spindly arms struggle briefly against their constraints.

He became still. “Once I captured a mayfly. I watched it and loved it all day, but by the evening it was dead.”

“You didn’t feed it?” Ana said into the burnt-earth smell of the leather speak-tube. Her voice was carried along the tube into the terrarium.

“Yes, I stole honey for it, but I didn’t know that mayflies can’t eat and that they are born, they mate and they die in a single day. I cried because my mayfly was lost forever.” His eyes closed, the translucent lids straining, as if he relived the memory. “And the next day I couldn’t bear to think that I had to go on without my beautiful mayfly... I was only a child.”

A curtain at the end of the tent chamber stirred. The girl employed to collect the money from Metheus’ visitors appeared. Urgently she beckoned Ana to her. “He’s here, the agent of the Prince – in with your uncle now. I would’ve come sooner, but your uncle made me stay.”

Both Ana and the girl knew that Metheus, inside the giant terrarium, could not hear them. Ana went back to the speak-tube. “I have to go now,” she told the boy, concealing her agitation.

**S**ilently but swiftly, she followed the girl along the connecting tent corridor which linked Metheus’ chamber to her uncle’s. The girl stood aside and Ana stepped past her into the chamber where she knew the sale of the boy was being negotiated. The smell of spiced goat-meat met her as conversation faded; a chuckle was dying on her Uncle Valket’s lips like water disappearing into the sand of the desert.

Three men sat cross-legged opposite Valket. One, who was dressed in voluminous white robes, had thin moustaches and swollen self-satisfied eyes which regarded Ana serenely. He held an advertising poster of Metheus. It had a picture of the boy rising up hideously like a spectre, and words dripping-blood which screamed: *Dare you visit the four-thousand-year-old boy?*

Ana was not sure which of the three strangers was the Prince’s agent and which his attendants, but she guessed that the agent was the one with the poster –

the one who, with one waxed eyebrow hitched up, was now looking to her uncle for an explanation of her sudden appearance.

Adjusting his threadbare embroidered waistcoat, Valket told him: “My dead brother’s daughter.”

Ana wanted to demand that Valket should not even think of going ahead with the sale of Metheus, but now that she was in the tent chamber she felt suddenly uncertain. The moustached one’s confident perusal of her had been unsettling. Unsure what to do, she strode to the other side of the chamber and looked out through a gap where the worn, leather-thonged canvas barely closed the opening it was stretched across. The canvas flapped tautly now and again in the warm wind as Ana stared through the gap until the draught made her eyes water.

Outside, on the slope which led down to the river, the bazaar was already crowded with people. And they were still coming: below the mountains Ana could see another caravan approaching along the way that the people in Chalapur called the Silk Road. Milling about down in the bazaar, the people seemed like rats to Ana, rats with bulging eyes that feasted upon the sight of human deformity, feasted upon the jars of extraordinary foetuses pickled in alcohol, the fantastic animals brought from the other side of the world, the skeletons of giants and dwarfs. Such were the sideshow exhibits of the bazaar.

Despite her disgust at the bazaar visitors, Ana felt a complicity in what they did. Before she had known Metheus well she had not objected to his slavery, and now, though she had argued with Valket over it, she had left it too late to do anything about it – the guilt she felt about what would happen to her family without their main source of income had earlier stalled her.

**S**he felt hot breath on her neck and she caught a whiff of spice and musk. Half turning, she realized that the Prince’s agent was standing behind her. She stared through the gap in the tent, trying to ignore him.

“So many people,” he said, observing the crowds.

She had no intention of making conversation with him.

Valket’s voice came from further back in the chamber. “Tomorrow Ahlek-Sur begins.”

“Ahle-Sur?”

“Our ceremony for the Time of Enlightenment.”

The agent’s voice came soft and close beside Ana’s gold-ringed ear. “And why does it trouble you that we



should purchase the so-called four-thousand-year-old-boy?"

She set her lips.

"Sometimes they chat a bit," Valket answered for her when she did not speak.

Ana sprang around. "We are friends!"

Valket did not meet her glare, but took a swallow from a leather bottle. "It's nothing she'll not get over," he said at last, wiping a trickle of liquid from his chin.

Still glaring at him, Ana said, "Metheusius has given his life to this family for two hundred and fifty years! How can you do this to him?"

"It's for the family, for you."

"With the property you will receive you will all have a more secure life," the agent agreed, "not subject to the vagaries of trade in the bazaar."

Ana strode up close to Valket. "And you will ignore my *bundwat*? It gives me the right to demand the boy's release."

"It's not meant for such things," Valket told her, shifting uncomfortably on the floor mat. "Your father didn't mean you to use the right of a gift for that."

"He granted it to me on his death bed so I can use it for what I want! Will you ignore my right?"

Valket twisted his fleshy lips once or twice, then his eyes fell and he said nothing.

Ana caught the eye of her cousin, Pavane, who with her mother was eating off a stub-legged table separate from the one before the men. With lips drawn back, Pavane nibbled at a steaming chunk of meat on the end of a wooden skewer. Her neat white teeth were decoratively capped with gold, and the ring piercing one nostril was gold too. As she bit and chewed, her eyes in their caves of dark make-up didn't leave Ana. From the narrowing of those hard, cold eyes, it would have been obvious to anyone, Ana reflected, where Pavane's loyalties lay. In the sound of her chewing Ana could almost hear the whispered word, "Disloyal!"

The Prince's agent clapped his hands once in a business-like way as if he was used to having others pay attention to what he did. "Well I might have agreed the sale, but I haven't personally seen the property..."

A worried frown appeared over Valket's long fleshy face. "But your own emissary said —"

"Oh don't worry, I'm expressing a purely casual interest, let me assure you. The specimen has already been ascertained authentic. Pure curiosity, I'm afraid." He beamed at Ana.

"He's no specimen," she muttered through gritted teeth.

Valket led the way to Metheusius' chamber. The moustached agent followed, but then threw a hand up to his mouth and nose in disgust. One of his attendants passed him a perfumed kerchief. He held this over the lower part of his face before accompanying Valket into the chamber. Furious at the way they were treating the boy, and at herself for not doing enough about it, Ana marched behind.

Inside the chamber the agent stood before the boy's huge, wheeled terrarium. Made of wood-framed glass panels, it looked like a waterless fish tank. The agent regarded it blankly for a moment then passed along the side of the terrarium, looking through the glass with a remote curiosity. He disappeared around the

back. He was coming around the other side, a slight frown wrinkling his features, when he suddenly looked up and caught sight of the boy. His eyes flared in surprise and he took an involuntary step backwards.

Ana smiled to herself. Even the tiniest confusion of the enemy was worth savouring.

The agent gestured nervously at the fibrous mass which filled the bottom half of the terrarium. "But is all this...?"

Valket nodded, wringing his fleshy hands together.

The agent peered closer at the fibrous mass, then up at Metheusius lying on top. Still holding the kerchief to his nose, the agent seemed to be searching for something, as if he suspected a trick of some kind, but Ana knew there was no trick to discover. She remembered how she had doubted her own senses when she had first seen the boy. She had been nine years old; her father was still alive and had judged her of an age to meet the source of their income.

She remembered how she had tried to hold her breath against the stench from the huge terrarium. She had stared wide-eyed and afraid through the glass and had, like the agent, seen at first only a mass of what appeared to be horsehair, caked with green towards the bottom — algae which also obscured the glass panes in places. Then she had picked out thin, almost-bony filaments twisting through the "horsehair": flat, convoluted ribbons of something unidentifiable. Higher up there were air pockets in the hair where these filaments broke free of their matrix, but still she could not see them for what they really were. Her father had drawn her attention to the boy himself. As now, he was up on the top of the hairy mass, half way to the roof of his terrarium and just below the opening of the chimney — which had the function of allowing fresh air to enter from the open sky.

Submerged in the horsehair from the waist down, the boy had seemed a pathetic human form, a naked and sickly male in his mid-teens with a soft, hairless face and pale, translucent skin. His legs were not visible, but his slender arms were weak and twisted. The horror of the realization which then followed had lived with Ana for weeks afterwards: she had suddenly noticed that the hair which was his bed attached itself to his head. It was *his* hair. The flat bony filaments which spiralled around him finally joined onto the ends of his fingers...

Valket uncoiled the leather speak-tube from the side of the cage. "You can talk to him, Excellency."

The agent looked even more confused. "He will understand?"

"He'll talk to you."

"He speaks? I thought he might be interpreted by a system of signs or such devices, but you say he speaks?"

Taking the end of the speak-tube uncertainly, the moustached man bent forward until his lips almost brushed the end of the tube. "CAN, YOU, HEAR, ME?"

Like a lizard's, the boy's eyes flicked open. "Only too well," came his high-pitched, hollow voice from inside the terrarium. He glanced at the agent's attendants, at Valket, at Ana, then his eyes slid back to the agent. "Who are you?"



Valket stepped close to the dignitary and with a respectful nod took the speak-tube from him. "Just a visitor to see you," he told the boy.

"He's no ordinary customer."

"Shouldn't we tell him?" Ana whispered to Valket.

Valket gave a shake of his head.

Uncertain what to do, Ana decided to say nothing for the time being.

During the brief exchange between Valket and the boy, the agent's eyes had opened wide. "Remarkable," he muttered.

He took the speak-tube from Valket. Although it prevented the access of infected air from outside the terrarium which might bring illness to the boy, Ana knew that the speak-tube was efficient as a sound carrier. This time, having observed Valket's use of it, the agent spoke more softly. "And how old are you?"

The boy's eyes closed in practised recollection. "I remember being an apprentice gardener in Akkad in the days of Sargon. I saw Nebuchadnezzar the First of Babylonia too, but my memories of such far off times are not good. There are gaps of hundreds of years which I have forgotten. More recent things, like being inside the library at Alexandria, I remember more clearly. I was in Rome in the Emperor Augustus' time. That one's as clear to me as yesterday – clearer!"

The speak-tube had gone slack in the agent's hands. "How long ago is the first...?"

"King Sargon – the one he said – was a bit more than four thousand years," Valket explained, "so that's why we call him that." He drew up a chair for the dignitary.

The agent ignored the chair and shook his head in disbelief. "And does he never come out of there?"

"Not in two hundred and fifty years. We clean his dirt tray daily..."

Glancing at Valket with a grimace of disgust, the agent strolled along the side of the cage, then back to the speak-tube. He grasped it firmly and asked the boy, "I hope that in such an extended life you have developed great skills in music and poetry?" He put his hand over the end of the tube and turned to Valket. "Apart from his value as an oracle, such skills would entertain his Highness the Prince greatly."

Ana winced when she heard these things. The question Metheus had been asked was the kind he disliked because it was always the awkward, persistent customers, the ones who seemed to regard his existence as a personal affront to them, who asked if he had accumulated amazing skills or abilities. And as for the idea that the boy would spend his time singing for the Prince...

"If you knew you had only a year or two to live," came Metheus' oft repeated reply from behind the glass, "then you would travel the world, read the finest books. You would learn music and poetry, you would live. If you knew that you would never die then you would attempt nothing, because eventually you would do these things anyway – statistically it must be so for an infinite existence." He sighed heavily. "Eventually I will achieve everything there is to achieve within human powers, at least."

Valket chuckled nervously at this.

"Then you've languished idly?" the agent said. "All your long life has been wasted, despite your inflated

talk! You might have been greater than all men, but as it is you are much less." He regarded the boy's physical plight with disgust.

Metheus' eyes narrowed. "Mortals such as you are as transitory to me as fleas; I snap my fingers and you are gone!" His angry declaration was rendered ineffective by the fact that – attached to his self-grown bed by endless nails as his fingers were – he could never snap them.

"Then why are you speaking to me at all?"

From watery, sunken eyes clogged with yellow rheum, the boy regarded the agent through the algae-patched walls of his terrarium. "The opium they give me if I cooperate is a pleasure outside time, a respite from eternity, you might say, for eternity is a long time to have to be a sideshow freak."

"Then I feel sorry for you."

Ana turned to the agent wanting to object to the way the conversation had gone.

"The way you see me now is but a daguerreotype view," Metheus told the agent before Ana could speak, "a mere captive instant in an endless life."

The agent's waxed eyebrows shot up. "I have seen a photographic daguerreotype. A remarkable thing. But I'm surprised you know of the process."

Metheus looked him up and down, then said, "I learn much from my more educated visitors. But allow me to continue: no doubt a passing beetle observing you asleep in your bed would judge that you have always been like that and will be so until you die, which would no doubt seem an intolerable life to the beetle. Such a beetle you are to me."

"Excellent," the agent muttered, smiling faintly at Metheus.

Metheus sighed heavily, seemed disappointed he had not succeeded in insulting the agent. Finally he told him: "Life is only worth living if you know you are going to die. Life followed by life followed by life ceases to be life."

Ana had heard many variations of this assertion in the time she had known Metheus, but one thing she knew which was rarely revealed to others was that the boy had once had a sister. There had been two of them blessed with immortality – as a result, Metheus had told Ana, of what he called a "mutation." In other people, inherited factors in the cells of their body triggered ageing – so he had explained it to her – but with he and his sister these factors were entirely absent, so that, just as the skin renews itself when it is cut, so their whole bodies were forever renewing themselves. However, Metheus' sister had died in an accident a thousand or so years before – something that was outside the bounds of bodily renewal. There was a man in Europe or America – Ana could not remember which Metheus had said – who had worked out how mutations worked. The boy had heard about this man from his more educated visitors. Ana remembered that the man's name was Darwin.

She was relieved now when the agent clapped his hands and said, "I have seen enough." He turned on his heel without another word and left the chamber.

She ran past the agent's attendants to catch up with him as he passed through the further chamber where her aunt and cousin were still eating.

"Despicable creature," the agent was muttering when Ana caught him by the arm.



He stopped and his eyes flared a warning.

Ana dropped her hand from his arm. "I'm sorry, I wanted to ask... Is there a chance I could go as well – to look after Metheusius in his new home?"

"We have our own skivvies for that."

"Please –"

The agent brushed past her. "My attendants will return for the property the day after tomorrow," he called to Valket. "We will deliver payment then. Have the creature's tank ready to load onto a flat cart."

With a flourish of his cloak, the agent was gone.

Tears pricking her eyes, Ana turned to Valket. "How could you?"

"It's for the sake of the family, daughter-of-my-brother." He wrung his hands urgently. "It's hard but it's the best for all of us."

"Not for Metheusius," Ana said.

Despite her distress, however, she did nurture a germ of hope. The agent had said he would not be returning until *the day after tomorrow*.

The dawn made the insides of the tent-complex glow with amber light. As Ana entered Meth-eusius' chamber she could hear the distant sounds of thousands of people in the foothills behind the bazaar chanting mantras. She went straight to the speak-tube. Metheusius was still asleep, but he stirred when she unhooked the tube. He looked up, surprised.

"Everyone's at the festival," she told him. "Now we've a chance to get you out of there."

He didn't respond.

"Don't you understand?"

"But it's impossible... How?"

Ana had to remind herself that he had been in the terrarium for two hundred and fifty years. "You want to be free, don't you?" she asked, pulling a chair to the side of the terrarium.

"I must have release from this existence."

She climbed up onto the chair and reached up towards the top of the glass wall. First she had to find a way inside. She pulled herself up onto the terrarium roof, then began to wrench at the base of the breathing chimney.

"Can you do it?" Metheusius called.

With a splintering sound the chimney broke free from its mount. With age it had corroded and crumbled.

"I can do it." Swinging the base of the chimney aside, she looked down at the boy through the round hole left by the chimney, then looked away guiltily. "I didn't tell you before... You're going to be sold."

Metheusius tilted his head back enough to look up at her with alarm.

Ana could not meet his gaze. "The rich customer yesterday," she explained, "he was the agent of a prince who's bought you. They're coming for you tonight."

The boy received the news silently.

Ana lowered her legs through the chimney hole, her long robe catching on the edges, then she dropped suddenly onto the bed of hair, right beside him. She had expected the hair to be spongy, but it was hard and compacted. Being close to the boy was like drinking the vapours of fresh manure inside a tropical greenhouse. It made her head swim. Although she

had known Metheusius for so long, close up he looked different, as if the glass of his cage had distorted his image all those years. Close up he was even more fragile and pale, as if made of wax.

She did not delay but turned to the locked door. She kicked at it several times with the flat of her foot, but slipped over on the moist surface of solid hair. She tried again and the door panes began to buckle outwards, then the old, brittle wood splintered and she managed to force the door open. One of the glass panes split across into jagged shards.

Reaching in her pocket, Ana brought out a big pair of scissors. She looked at the boy, held down as he was at the extremities by thick sweeps of hair and coiling nails.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready," he said, and his voice sounded clear and sharp now that Ana was inside the terrarium.

She began to hack at his finger nails, snapping and chopping through them as if they were bamboo. When his black nails were only inch-long stubs, she began to slash with the scissors into his thick greasy hair. She drew back in horror for a moment as hundreds of tiny creatures began to fly out and run across her hands, then she went back to her task with renewed vigour.

His hair shorn to shoulder-length, she hooked her hands under his arms and tried to haul him free of the mass of hair in which his sore-covered legs were buried from the thighs down. This was more difficult, held in place as his feet were by the roots which were his own toe nails. She hacked and gouged at the surrounding mats of hairy matrix, but this took some time, in which the threat of discovery was never far from the front of her mind, for her family would have noticed – and would now be wondering why – she had left the festival.

Eventually, tired and hot, Ana managed to drag Metheusius sufficiently free of the matted hair to begin to slash through his green, slimy toe-nails. She had become frantic by now, fearing discovery at any moment, but at last his self-grown bonds were all severed. She dragged him to the shattered door, climbed out first then dragged him out backwards past the broken glass and onto the dusty floor of the chamber.

She was surprised how light he was. His skin came off in thin papery sheets on her hands and arms.

"Do you think you can stand?" Ana knew that for months he had been doing muscle-tensioning exercises in an attempt to regrow his muscles and be ready for the release he had always trusted she would effect: *I must have the strength I will need to do what I have to do*, he had told her repeatedly.

Now he didn't reply to her question, but seemed disorientated by the experience of being outside the terrarium. After a moment he struggled to stand, and with Ana's help managed to lean upright against the side of his prison.

He was completely naked apart from some wires hooped around his hips, which Ana realized with a start were the inner structure of a pair of chambulots – the trouser-like garb of all males in the bazaar. The fabric of the chambulots must have rotted on his body long ago.

Suddenly conscious of his nakedness, Ana took the



loose gown she had brought with her and draped it around him, pulling the strings tight. "I'm going to take you to Chalapur," she whispered. "I have friends there who'll help us."

The boy placed a warty hand on her shoulder and told her, "Thank you, Ana, my little mayfly."

Ana was briefly aware that he had paid her a compliment of some kind, but she had to concentrate on getting him out of there. Wrapping her arms firmly around him, she half-carried him across the chamber. She flung out a hand to scoop aside the curtain ahead of them. Valket was coming along the corridor towards them.

"God preserve us!" he cried when he saw what was happening.

**W**ith a sinking feeling Ana watched the bazaar grow closer from her seat in the mule-drawn wagon. The wagon came to a halt on the road beside the stalls which laid their wares out on the edges of the hoof-beaten silk route. The dust cloud which had followed her transport caught up; pausing only to thank the wagon owner for the ride, Ana hurried out of the dusty air and into the bazaar.

When Valket had caught her trying to liberate Metheusius two days before, she had argued vehemently with her uncle. Finally, as Valket remained unwilling to allow Metheusius to leave with her, Ana had gone alone to Chalapur in an attempt to obtain help from the authorities to get the boy released, or at least to prevent his sale to the prince of what was a neighbouring state. Now, as she made her way from the road up through the quiet, half-empty bazaar, she wished desperately that she had thought of something better, for her plan had failed. She had not received the support she had hoped for. And now she feared they would already have taken Metheusius.

It was almost dusk. In the distance, hidden by the approaching night, came the singing of the people up in the hills, celebrating Ahlek-Sur. When she reached the tents of her family, Ana glanced up. Instantly she knew something had changed, though at first she could not say what. Then she realized with a start that the green flags with their elephant insignia, that had flown atop the tents for as long as she could remember, were missing. Fear lent her speed and she ran to the tents. Pavane was standing just outside, recklessly setting alight some rubbish too close to the flapping canvas. The blossoming orange flames were bright and made the dusk deeper.

As Ana approached, Pavane looked up from her task and regarded her cousin coldly though the flicker of the flames was reflected in her eyes and her nose-ringing.

"Pavane," Ana called to her.

"It's all your fault, you are a traitor to this family."

Ana had expected such a response, but she couldn't understand why the flags had gone from the tents. "What's happened? Have they taken Metheusius?"

Valket's daughter did not answer but glared at the side of the tent as if her eyes could burn a hole in it. Finally she said, "Father has accepted your *bundwat*."

Ana gasped. "But I don't understand, I thought he would never —"

"Then you were wrong. He says the family is the most important thing in his life and that's why he must honour your *bundwat*, but he is weak, like you. The fool has destroyed the family."

"So the sale didn't go through? Metheusius is free?"

"They're all down by the river," Pavane told her dismissively.

She threw Ana a final accusatory look before disappearing into the tent.

**G**asping for breath, Ana made her way down between the dark tents towards the river. Across the foothills which led up towards the mountains thousands of specks of light stood out in ranks: the torches of the festival-goers.

Down at the river the sluggish water was brighter than the surrounding land, reflecting the sky. A breeze blew off it, wrinkling the surface and scattering sparks from a bonfire into the air. Ana could smell the smoke from the fire before she got close. It didn't smell right. It had a distinctive taint which she had experienced once before.

She ran towards the fire. The silhouettes of two figures sitting beside it were thrown into and out of view as the flames twisted in the wind. She heard chanting coming from the figures — the chanting of prayers not festival mantras. She recognized the figures, her uncle and aunt; but where was Metheusius? She knew the smell from the fire: it was the same as the smell of her father's funeral pyre.

Choking on the smoke, tears leaking from her eyes, she threw herself down upon the seated figures. She found herself in Valket's arms. "I'm sorry child," he told her hoarsely as she struggled against him.

"You killed Metheusius," she screamed in her confusion.

Her uncle gripped her arms very tightly. "No! He killed himself. I released him and he killed himself." Valket burst into tears, hugging Ana to him.

Like a child, she buried her head in his chest. "No, no..."

Valket smoothed Ana's hair away from her face. "I washed him myself. I tried to make up for all the years..."

Through bleary eyes Ana watched as her aunt launched the little wooden raft, on which Metheusius' remains burned, out onto the river.

"Why did he do it?" Valket muttered. "I offered him a partnership..."

Ana rubbed the tears and smoke from her eyes. "He called me his little mayfly," she said.

The raft was drifting slowly out into the stronger currents nearer the centre of the river, spiralling peacefully away from them. The flames had died down and all that Ana could see as the raft swept into the darkness of river and night was a clump of glowing embers. The embers became a speck of gold slipping downstream, a speck that flickered once, then merged forever into the peace of night.

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**Lawrence Dyer** lives in Buxton, Derbyshire, and has contributed short fiction to small-press magazines. The above is his first story to appear in *Interzone*.

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ISSUE TWO

SF/FANTASY  
PREVIEW

SUMMER 1993

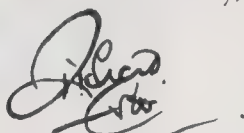
GOLLANCZ

In the April issue of *Interzone*, Gollancz launched a new concept in introducing books to the public with a special sampler of book extracts. It proved to be a big success. A reader survey prompted a huge response and a vast majority felt the extracts would be helpful in choosing their reading material. Many also suggested improvements to the *Preview* which have been incorporated into this second issue; you'll now find information about the book's plot, the author, and the price and format of each book. We also received much useful feedback on all sorts of publishing issues which has been gratefully received by all the staff here at Gollancz. Thank you so much to those who completed the survey.

Many of you seemed particularly interested in finding out more about the authors and this time we have selected three who are at interesting points in their careers. Two of them – Christopher Evans and Phillip Mann – are experienced writers and familiar to many SF and fantasy fans. *Aztec Century*, highlighted here, is Christopher Evans' biggest book to date and certain to bring his talent to a very large audience. The piece we have included from Phillip Mann's *A Land Fit for Heroes* will introduce thousands to the first volume in a major new trilogy. Paul Kearney is a newcomer in the fantasy genre and *A Different Kingdom*, excerpted here, follows his successful debut, *The Way to Babylon*.

We hope you enjoy the second *Preview* and that you will continue to send us your comments. (Promotions Department, Cassell, Villiers House, 41/47 Strand, London WC2N 5JE.)

Yours sincerely,



Richard Evans  
Publishing Director

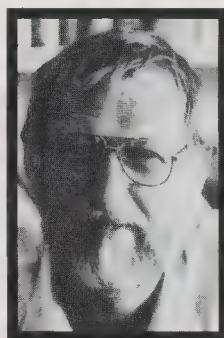
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THIS ISSUE OF THE  
GOLLANCZ SF/FANTASY PREVIEW FEATURES THE WORK OF:

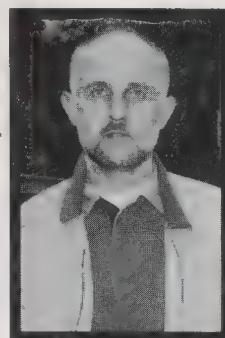
PAUL KEARNEY



PHILLIP MANN



CHRISTOPHER EVANS

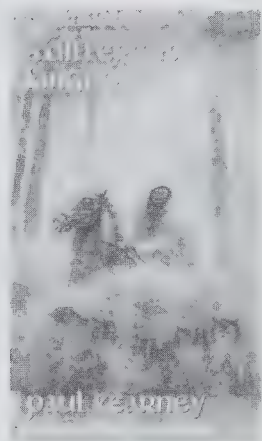




**O**n a remote farm in Northern Ireland a young boy, Michael Fay, is being brought up by his grandparents. One late summer's day he finds that the countryside he thought he knew conceals something else – a different world...

# a different kingdom

PAUL KEARNEY



Even then Michael's grandmother seemed older than his grandfather whom she would one day outlive. She was a big woman with large hands and a mop of white hair that escaped every clip and band she installed to imprison it. Inclined to stoutness, she called herself 'big-boned', and would glare round when she said it, as if daring anyone to contradict her. Her eyes were a bright blue, the whites of them slowly yellowing with the weight of years, but she kept her own chickens and milked her own goat and darned endless socks with complacent skill. She cooked huge meals effortlessly, bringing in vegetables from the garden with the mud clinging to them and bullying anyone who was near to carry in wood for the big range that shouted with heat at one end of the kitchen, taking up almost the entire wall. Its top plate was never cold and there was always a villainous pot of tea stewing that would be as dark as clay in the cup and which Michael's grandfather downed daily by the gallon. Coffee was unheard of, and breakfasts were massive affairs of spitting bacon and fried eggs and soda bread. The men – family and hired workers – would congregate in the stone-flagged kitchen and eat mounds of steaming food before turning out to the fields and stables while mist was rising up out of the meadow bottoms and the last star was considering quitting the sky. There were cold mornings, stiff with winter and dark as pitch, when the men took swinging lanterns out with them, electricity not yet having been wired to the byre and the stables. And there were soft summer dawns when the sun would be a ball of molten fire inching its way up a flawless sky and pouring flaxen light over the waking land like a benison.

And if Michael's grandfather, six feet

five inches of him, was lord of the farm and the fields, the labourers and the crops, then

his grandmother was mistress of the house, provider of meals and stern guardian of manners. Hands were washed before meals with the strong carbolic soap whose reek would haunt Michael the whole of his life, and boots were scrubbed free of mud. The house and the farm seemed all of a bustle in those days, with people coming and going, boots clumping in the hall, his grandmother calling out in the yard for the men to come for their dinner – or if they were too far away then Michael would be sent scurrying out to the fields where they would be scattered at their jobs, sweat on their faces, scythes or halters or buckets or shovels or sacks or pitchforks in their hands. He remembered evenings like that, haymaking evenings, when there were clouds of midges floating like gauze in the air and a cow's low would carry for miles in the stillness, and he would be plastered with hayseed and specked with liquid dung from his pelter through the meadows to fetch the others in.

'You've shit on your nose,' he would be told calmly. 'What have you been doing, snowballing with it? Go on with you. Get in and scrub, or your gran will have your hide.' And he would not see the grin they threw at his running back.

Michael Fay, with shit on his nose, had been running back like that one day in the middle of a waning summer when he tripped, and fell down, and slipped, and slid, and had his life picked up and thrown around and put down



again in a different place. In another world.

• • •

He could smell the rich earth as he slipped along it, tumbling down a steep incline with his short limbs flailing. He smelled wild garlic and river mud, and when the world had stopped turning he found that he was on the slope leading to the stream at the foot of the bottom meadow, had cartwheeled down twenty feet of steep, hazel-covered bank and had left the sunset-lit evening behind, up in the meadow. Here it was gloomier, with the trees – alder and willow – edging close to the water like animals come to drink, and the twilight already deepening in their shadow.

He sat up, dusting himself off with stubby hands. He could feel twigs lodged in his hair and beetling around inside his shirt, and his clothes were green and black with mud and mould. He grimaced, peering at his black palms then at the river hollow, loud with water noise, swamped with an early dusk. He trolled for minnow here often during the long afternoons when his grandmother released him from the swarm of jobs she found for him. He knew this river – for to him it was a river, though barely ten feet wide and shallow enough to wake. If he followed it for a few hundred yards upstream he would come to the old bridge, where a seldom-used road crossed it and the heavy masonry was sunk in the water like the wall of a castle, with nothing but black darkness and skipping water rats under its arch.

Michael shivered, and then froze like a startled rabbit. For there was something different about the river this evening, something strange. The trees seemed thicker, bigger. The willows seemed older, their hair dripping lower into the bickering water. And there were no longer any stumps on the slope he had just fallen down.

He looked behind him. It was true. His grandfather had thinned out the hazel there so the sheep could make their way to the river to drink. Cattle would never have made it down the steep slope without slipping, but sheep could. There had been stumps there to trip the unwary, tangled with ivy and covered with moss, but not one had interrupted Michael's downward slide, and he could see none now. Odd.

But it flitted out of his mind as quickly as it had come. In the grown-up world there would be an explanation as there always was. Here it did not matter. He sat for a moment, listening to the river and half smiling to himself. Above him the evening star climbed unnoticed over the heads of the trees. All thought of dinner and his errands was leached out of his head. He sat as if

waiting for something.

There was a movement in the trees on the other bank of the river. He sat still, though his heart began to beat an audible tattoo in his head.

Branches swung back and forth; something heavy was blundering through them. He stared, but could make out nothing in the fading light. His muscles began to tense under him and his hands gripped fistfuls of leaf mould, dirt grinding in under his nails.

He heard a snatch of talk – a voice, and then another answering. He could not understand the words. They sounded deep, snarling, guttural; but rhythmic as a song. He got up on his haunches, ready for flight.

Something burst into view in the brambles opposite, on the other side of the river. It was the grinning mask of a fox, the eyes alight and the teeth shining, but under it two more eyes glittered and there was a streak of teeth set in a wide grin. Shock took the air out of Michael's lungs and he fell backwards, scrabbling through the twigs and leaves. There was a bark of something like laughter, and more movement along the riverbank; a dark flickering of shadow. Something splashed into the water, and he caught a glimpse of a prick-eared shape wading the stream upright. There was more talk, more of the song-like chanting and another rattle of hard laughter, like the sound of a woodpecker at work.

'God!' he squealed, kicking soil and leaves into the air as, without thought, he propelled himself up the slope with his backside dragging in the earth. There were more shapes crowding the stream now, though none had yet reached his bank. They were man-like, crouched, wrapped in furs, their limbs gleaming with sweat or paint and the fox faces on their heads. Two of them bore a long pole on their shoulders, a dark shape swinging from it. Something like a hat rack was bound up to the pole. Antlers. And as the air moved out of the river, pushed by a stray breeze, he could smell them. They stank of urine, of rotten meat, of woodsmoke. Their dripping burden reeked of blood and offal.

His nerve broke. He turned his back to the river with the air whooping in and out of his lungs and tears of terror flashing unnoticed on his face. His feet slipped in the muck and mould, his fingers gouging the solid for grip. He clawed his way up to where the trees thinned and the light grew, up to the meadow where he had left his world behind. And as he did, he stubbed his groping fingers agonizingly on a moss-covered tree stump and fell to one side, crying, waiting for the shapes in the river to pounce on him, for



that evil stink to surround him. He shut his eyes.

But nothing happened.

He opened them a slit, saw nothing in the gloom, and then stared wide-eyed down the bank.

There was nothing in the river. A bird sang evensong to itself and the brightness of the water was unbroken. The trees were quiet, undisturbed. He sniffed, stifling sobs, and heard across the fields the sounds of the men walking to the house for their dinner. He looked out and saw their shapes walking dark across the dimming fields, the sudden glow of a cigarette, like a tiny eye, winking at him. He crawled out of the well of shadow that was the river course and lay there on the edge of the meadow a moment, spent, his chest heaving in the slow air of the evening. A wood pigeon was talking softly to itself somewhere. One of the men laughed at something – a wholesome, safe sound. He heard the metallic clink of a gate and knew they were entering the back yard, where the lights of the house would be yellow in the windows though it

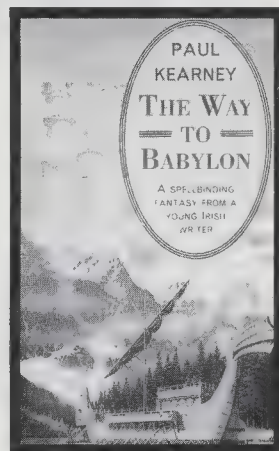
was not yet dark. He got up unsteadily, glancing behind him, and limped away wiping his eyes, blowing his nose on his sleeve. He could feel the mud caking on his cheeks, stiffening under his nails. His grandmother would certainly tan his hide for coming in like this.



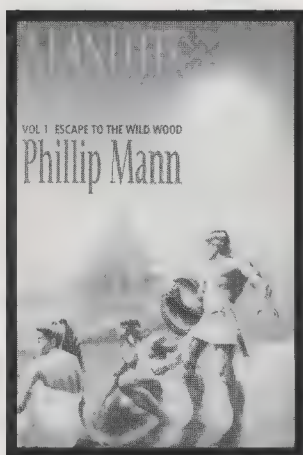
**Paul Kearney lives  
in Northern Ireland.**

**His first novel,  
*The Way to Babylon*, is  
now available in  
VGSF at £4.99.**

**Hardback: £15.99,  
paperback: £8.99.**



PHILLIP  
MANN



**I**n a world where the Roman legions never left Britain, the Roman games have survived in all their bloody ceremony. In a huge battle dome that dominates the capital city of York, artificial monsters with human pilots do battle in a vast man-made landscape ...

# A LAND FIT FOR HEROES

## VOL 1: ESCAPE TO THE WILD WOOD

**A**s the sound of bugles faded, the thousands of spectators quietened and their attention again became focused on the battlescape which was again brilliantly illuminated. All that could be seen of the spectators on the chalet high above was a row of binoculars resting on the balcony rail. No one knew how the contest would begin. Surprise was one of the main ingredients.

It was the massed crowds on the terraces who first saw movement among the dark pine trees high on the mountain. Trees shook where there was no breeze. Artificial snow, dislodged, fell in a cascade. Something was moving: some





giant beast. It was working its way down the mountainside using the pine trees for cover. It moved stealthily despite its bulk and only occasionally was a tree seen to jerk and then fall.

Binoculars searched the depth of the battlescape looking for the opponent. But nothing moved.

The creature in the pine trees reached the foothills where the pine woods ended, and a squat triangular lizard's head poked out briefly from the undergrowth. On its horned crown it bore the device of the Ulysses family and this was greeted with a cheer from that family's many supporters. The creature sniffed the air and then the entire beast advanced.

A monster, fancifully modelled on prehistoric forms, emerged dragging its long tail which flexed back and forth, scything down small trees and bushes. The beast looked like a dragon and if plumes of smoke had belched from its nostrils then this would have seemed quite appropriate. Indeed, one of the horns on its head was equipped to shoot flame but this was strictly prohibited in the Battle Dome. The creature had six legs which worked in pairs, and each leg had black talons of carbon steel which left imprints in the turf as it moved. The rear legs were mighty haunches. They were jointed and could move independently or together and could hurl the creature forwards at tremendous speed, at a leap if needs be. They could also crush an opponent, for individually they could be raised high like a hammer to come smashing down. The middle pair of legs was mainly for support. They had spiked wheels between the talons and could be raised telescopically, giving the creature a humped appearance. The spiked wheels were chain-driven and provided the dragon with a steady, sustained speed. Slung between the middle legs was a retractable wheel-and-track mechanism. This was particularly useful if the creature had to climb up a hill or needed to anchor itself in the ground to withstand a charge. The half-track also allowed the beast to inch forward if required, a movement far too subtle for the mighty drive-haunches or requiring too much traction for the middle legs. The front pair of legs was simply for support and guidance. They too were telescopic and could lift the front of the creature some thirty feet off the ground. When both the front and the middle legs were extended the dragon appeared to be begging. High on its front the creature carried a pair of claws. These were simply for fighting. The claws closed like knives folding together and the entire joint could swivel and extend from the body of the beast.

In its appearance the dragon was quite beautiful and it was painted afresh after every fight. Scales of different sizes covered its entire body. The colours of these ranged from aquamarine round the belly to burnished red at the spine. On the head and neck the scales were golden. Rising above the spine were pentagonal plates which looked like defensive armour but whose primary function was to serve as heat-exchange units. When the creature was at rest these units also served as steps. In movement the creature gave an awesome impression of fluid grace and great power while yet being somewhat comic.

Free from the restrictions of the wood the dragon trundled into open space and looked about. Then it raised its massive head and opened its jaws, displaying interlocking teeth, and roared. The meaning of the roar was unmistakable. It was a challenge. It said, 'Come out and fight, whoever you are.' Silence greeted this challenge.

This was not normal. Usually by now the shape of a battle was forming and a challenge was answered with a challenge. A hum of conversation broke out as people began to wonder if something had gone wrong. Then again, others reasoned, this was a grudge match to settle a long-standing argument between the Ulysses family and the Caesares, and in such cases there was considerable latitude in interpreting the rules. The result was that the contestants more or less played as they saw fit, grabbing advantage when it presented itself, and to hell with the code of conduct. While most battles ended with an act of surrender, more than once in recent history a battle had resulted in the death of the loser and the total dismemberment of his vehicle. One never knew, battle-fever being unpredictable. It was widely speculated in the crowd (though only in whispers) that this contest would end in a death, for the Ulysses and the Caesares were old rivals and had many reasons to hate.

So people muttered and waited and then the more observant began pointing towards the lake. A ripple line had appeared, forming a V on the lake's surface. Whatever was below the surface was unmistakably driving for the lake's edge where the trees hung out over the water and provided cover.

The monster saw nothing of this. It stamped on the plain near the standing stones and again bellowed its challenge with back arched and mouth open wide. It smashed its front claws together and the air shimmered above its spines as it shed energy. For a few moments it paused with one rear leg raised, immobile as a statue, and



the onlookers guessed that the Ulysses who was driving the beast was checking with battle headquarters to make sure that there had not been some foul-up in the organization and that a battle was really on.

The pause was all the creature in the lake needed. It launched itself from the water using the dappled shade from the trees as camouflage and the standing stones for cover. It was low like a crab but ran like a spider. It had a horned head with a frill of bone to protect its spine. Tusks stood out from its lower jaw and with these it could lever and pitch. On giant arms in front it sported a pair of claws which were spiked and razor-sharp.

It came like a shadow over the grass and the Dragon with the burnished scales found itself attacked before it could move. The Crab sank its tusks near the place where the monster's tail joined its body and it attempted to rip part of the scales free. But the Dragon read the plan and planted one of its giant hind feet squarely on one of the Crab's pincers and crushed it with its weight. Sparks flew and the claw became detached. At this a murmur rose from the spectators.

The giant Crab pulled back, leaving its claw behind, and sat on its rear legs with its spiny head advanced. It looked for advantage and what damage it might have caused.

The Dragon was wounded, that was clear. It rounded to face the Crab but it dragged one of its rear legs slightly. A hole had been opened up in the dragon's plating and several red scales now lay scattered and bent on the grass. Those spectators with binoculars could see one of the high-pressure air-pistons which powered the leg flailing about inside the dragon. Its couplings were broken but power was still being fed to it. The terrible clattering of the loose piston-arm could be heard by everyone.

The Dragon roared and lowered its head. The tractor mechanism under its belly whirred into life and began to churn the earth, dragging the beast round. There came a wrenching of gears and the Dragon began to advance with jaws open. To the experts on the terraces this seemed like a stupid manoeuvre. The Dragon seemed to be making itself vulnerable. It seemed to be inviting attack. The giant Crab skittered round, suspicious, trying to approach the monster on its damaged flank, but the Dragon kept it at bay.

Then with a suddenness which caught the onlookers by surprise, the Dragon heaved forward using its rear legs in a single leap. It

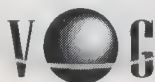
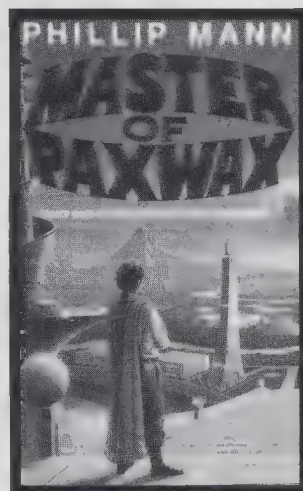
took the spines of the Crab's head in its mouth and with its front claws tried to shake it. For its part the Crab did not retreat but leaped forwards and its tusks opened a wound low on the monster's throat. Black oil spurted. Pressing its advantage the giant Crab caught the Dragon round the throat and shoulders with its remaining claw and began to twist its neck. Methodically the Crab heaved part of its bulk up on to the Dragon's back, locking its legs in the heat-exchange units and bending the plates back. It was seeking unbreakable leverage. And then, just when it looked as though the Dragon would be torn open in the throat, the Dragon heaved and rolled. This was a move rarely seen, a dangerous move, for the torque of neck and tail had left many such creatures with compound dislocations. Easy prey; easy meat. Defeated. Sometimes, too, the gimbals which held the giant flywheel that gave the Dragon its power fractured, sending the wheel bounding free to destroy everything within the body of the beast.

But this roll was carefully executed. Every part of the beast joined in the convulsion so that a mighty peristalsis took place, and the Dragon rolled over the Crab and squashed it. The cracking of the carapace could be heard by everyone. The legs on one side crumpled and hydraulic pistons broke through the skin and began pouring oil. The remaining claw opened and closed jerkily. To add final insult to injury, the Dragon shook itself free and then turned its back on the Crab, raised its tail and brought it smashing down like the blunt back of an axe on an enamel garden bucket. The Crab ruptured in every seam. The Dragon limped away. The battle was over. It had lasted just seven minutes.



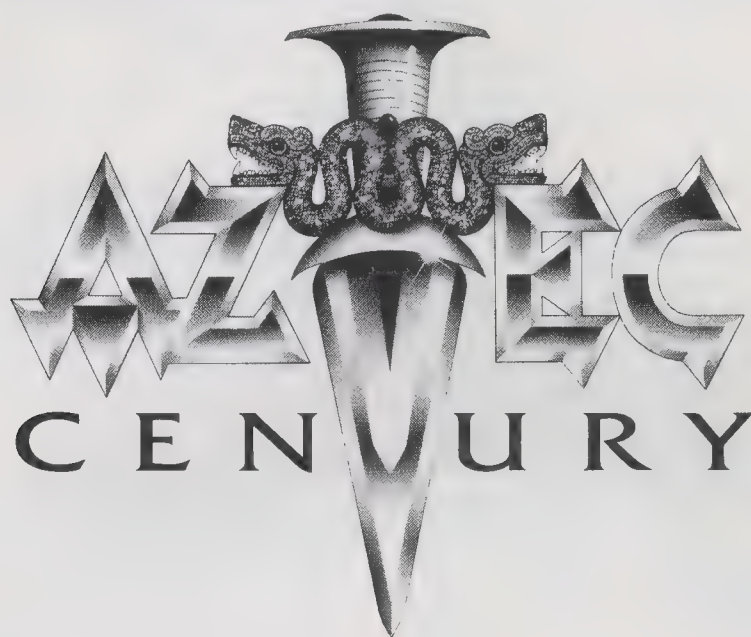
**Phillip Mann was born in Yorkshire but now lives in New Zealand. His novels include *The Eye of the Queen*, *Master of Paxwax* (now available in paperback in VGSF at £4.99), *The Fall of the Families*, *Pioneers* and *Wulfsyarn*.**

**Hardback £15.99.**

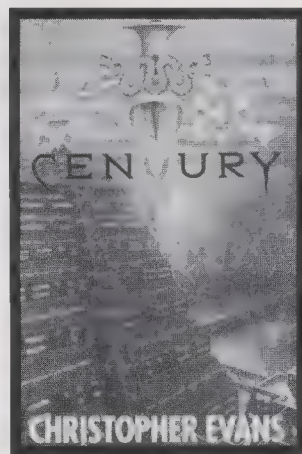




**I**t is the late twentieth century and Britain has been invaded by the forces of the Aztec Empire, whose armies have swept the globe in the five hundred years since Cortez turned traitor. Two princesses of the British royal family have taken refuge in a remote Welsh valley and are awaiting rescue by a Russian airship...



**CHRISTOPHER EVANS**



**I**t was Alex who shook me awake. Groggy, I sat up and saw the first blue hints of dawn through the window.

'Is it here?' I asked.

'Not yet. But I'd be grateful if you took over the watch.'

'Have you been up all night?'

He shrugged. 'I thought I'd let everyone get plenty of rest. It could be a long day today.'

'Into bed immediately,' I ordered him.

I dressed and went down to the balcony. The dawn chorus had started, though the valley still lay in darkness. Everyone else apart from Victoria was asleep on sofas and armchairs in the drawing room beyond.

Perhaps the Russian craft had been delayed or even shot down. According to Alex, it would most likely follow a northerly route to avoid Aztec airspace in mainland Europe and England, coming down over the Irish Sea and approaching us from the west. I began to fear that it had never set out in the first place.

I went to the kitchen and put a pot of water on the paraffin stove. The smell of the stove made me feel nauseous, so I returned to the balcony.

And then I saw it.

Far south, down the twilit valley, framed by the rounded black hills, was a point of light.

My immediate instinct was to rouse the others and give them the good news that at

last the Russians were coming. But as I stared, the point of light resolved into three – one larger, the other two smaller.

All were golden.

For long moments I did not move. I couldn't take my eyes off their firefly glow, as gold as the sun.

'Enemy aircraft!' I shouted. 'They're coming!'

In the drawing room, everyone awoke. There was a brief befuddled panic before Alex appeared and confirmed that they were indeed Aztec craft. He began marshalling us.

I rushed off to wake Victoria. She was still soundly asleep, naked under the sheets. I shook her awake. Ignoring her protests, I scrambled around the room, finding jeans, a blouse, a sweater.

Alex hastened into the room just as Victoria was struggling into her boots. He was carrying his attaché case.

'Quickly!' he told us.

We hurried downstairs and went out through a side door, crossing a potato bed before slipping through a yew hedge. A stone stairway led down and away from the house. We skirted the pine plantation, heading across the lower slopes in the general direction of the colliery.

'Where are the others?' I asked.

Alex's reply was drowned in a searing noise which was followed by an eruption of flame on the lower terraces of the garden. We were bathed in golden light as our attackers completed their first pass.

The two smaller craft were fast-flying,



manoeuvrable interceptors with slender fuselages and sickle wings. Their larger companion had a pointed nose and high swept-back wings which made it resemble an enormous golden bird of prey: it was a gunship transporter, its hold typically crammed with troops who would spew out to occupy positions softened up by the craft's firepower. All three shone brilliant gold in the gathering dawn.

Alex crouched and opened his briefcase. He took out the computer disk and thrust it at me.

I stood frozen, staring at it.

'Take it!' he insisted. 'I'm going back for the others.'

He closed the briefcase and flung it away from him, sending it spinning through the air.

'Alex—'

'The codeword's *axolotl*.' He repeated the word then forced a grin. 'Don't worry, I'll be back. Head for the bath-house. I'll find you there as soon as I can. Now get clear of here!'

Banking sharply, and utterly silently, the interceptors came in again. Plumes of liquid fire spurted from their noses, plummeting down to burst on the ground, setting clumps of gorse ablaze and throwing the skeletal framework of the tower into stark relief. Alex was already blotted from view by the smoke.

I slipped the disk into a pocket of my jacket. Keeping Victoria close to me, I led her down the mountain path towards the bath-house, a squat building which stood on the lower flank of the valley. The air was thick with smoke and the petroleum smell of *xiuhatl* liquid incendiary.

We skirted the colliery, and I kept glancing back with each explosion. The gunship hovered at a distance while the interceptors swept in, spreading fire and mayhem. The house was still intact, and now the small craft paused in their attacks while the gunship descended until it hung no more than a hundred yards above the house.

White light from the belly of the ship bathed the entire area.

'You will surrender immediately. No further attacks will be made. You will surrender immediately.'

The amplified message came from the gunship. It was repeated. I pulled Victoria down behind a low wall, searching the hillsides for some sign of Alex and the others.

I heard the sound of rifle-fire and I knew it came from the house, a defiant and futile attempt to resist the attackers. A gust of wind cloaked us briefly in gorse smoke. There was a huge pneumatic thump, and the house

erupted in a cataclysm of fire.

The blast of heat from the explosion seared our faces, and I pushed Victoria down. When I finally looked up again, fleeing sheep shone like phantoms in the fierce light of the inferno. The house was gone.

My eyes were blinded with heat and tears. Then my heart leapt into my throat as someone grabbed my wrist.

It was Bevan.

'Be quick, now,' he said. 'This way.'

Half pulled, half following, we were led up an incline, scrambling over slag and discarded machine parts, slithering up treacherous shaly slopes, the ground sliding under our feet. Victoria was gasping and sobbing the word 'Please ... Please ...' over and over again, though whether she wanted to stop or was desperate to find safety, I could not say.

Then in front of us, in an overgrown wall behind a tangle of hawthorn, a cast-iron pipe jutted out. About three feet wide, it was coated with moss and algae, a dribble of rusty water trickling from it.

'Right,' said Bevan. 'In you go, then.'

Victoria's hand tightened in mine. All three of us were panting, and I felt as if I might be sick at any moment. The pipe stood at chest height above a stagnant rushy puddle. Its interior was utterly dark.

'We can't go in there,' I heard myself say.

'Says who?' Bevan replied. 'Want them to have you, do you?'

'The others,' I murmured. 'Alex ...'

'You leave them to me. Go on, now. In.'

The sky was lightening rapidly, and I knew we had little time left. His urgency and insistence galvanized me. Quickly I scrambled up into the maw of the pipe. Bevan helped Victoria in behind me.

I wanted him to join us inside, but he did not. Face framed in its mouth, he said, 'Go in as far as you can, where it's dark. Stay there until I come back. Don't make a bloody sound.'

And then he was gone.



Christopher Evans' novels include *Cappella's Golden Eyes*, *The Insider*, *In Limbo* and *Chimaeras*. *Aztec Century* is his first book published by Victor Gollancz. He lives in London.

Hardback £15.99, paperback £8.99.





# Ansible Link

## David Langford



In a touching ceremony in April, the Science Fiction Foundation said its last farewell to London and made a presentation to Joyce Day, the part-time secretary who has effectively run the Foundation and its library ever since the Administrator post was axed by the N.E. London Polytechnic (now the University of East London) in 1980. Photographs proved that the sf research library was actually on shelves in its new University of Liverpool home, and hordes of applications for the new, salaried Administrator post were reported. Euphoria reigned. A brief requiem in the manner of Private Eye's E.J. Thribb was pressed into my hand by an anonymous editor of sf anthologies:

*Lines on the Removal of the SF Foundation to Liverpool*

So  
Farewell then  
North East London Polytechnic  
As was.  
"We can't afford it."  
That was  
Your catchphrase.

### The Revelling Princelings

Stephen King collectors in the USA who pounced on "special limited first editions" of his recent novels were miffed to learn that the cheap British book club versions of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne* are also the true world first editions... the latter by just one day. A book catalogue featuring the special edition of King's story "My Pretty Pony" – a snip at \$2,200 in brushed stainless steel covers with, mounted on the front, a small and cheap-looking digital clock – reports that the copy is in the usual state. That is, the clock has stopped.

W. Somerset Maugham (or someone imitating his signature) insists on pointing out prophetic phrases in his 1923 *On a Chinese Screen*, seemingly predicting the epic *Chung Kuo* series. For example: "I don't much care for all these Chinese things meself," answered my hostess briskly, 'but Mr Wingrove's set on them.'... 'Mr Wingrove won't hear a word against the Chinese,' said his wife, 'he simply loves them.'" And so on.

Maureen F. McHugh's novel *China Mountain Zhang* has won the latest James Tiptree Jr award for sf exploring gender-related issues. I like the way

this award is funded, in a little joke on those who complain it's all run by women, by selling such items as cookbooks – *The Bakery Men Don't See* (which was shortlisted for a nonfiction Hugo award) and *Her Smoke Rose Up From Supper*.

Marge Piercy received the £1,000 Arthur C. Clarke award for her novel *Body of Glass*, soon to be a Penguin paperback. At the somewhat sham-bolic presentation ceremony there were noises of disappointment that the runner-up *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson had not won. Several publishers were said to be planning a future boycott of the award after this "baffling" result. Yet spies tell me that *Body of Glass* was the immediate first choice of five award judges, and second choice for the sixth. (In some alternate branch of history, the judges are being criticized for unimaginatively choosing *Red Mars* "just because" it has a highly enthusiastic plug from Clarke himself on the jacket...) On one hand, it is not the duty of an "expert" judging panel to discover and rubber-stamp whatever the popular mood might be. On the other, dismay was also expressed by informed critics who had actually read the Piercy book, including John Clute and Roz Kaveney. The latter remarked: "People were giving the judges very dirty looks. Of course the prime idiocy was not shortlisting Sarah Canary..."

Leigh Priest (Kennedy) has taken the plunge and acquired British citizenship by reciting something I didn't even know we Brits had... our Oath of Allegiance.

Ian Watson, golden boy of British sf, was 50 this April.

### Infinitely Improbable

*At Last!* The new *Encyclopaedia of SF* ed. John Clute and Peter Nicholls is a whoppingly impressive production. Congratulations to all. Statistics: 1,370 pages plus prelims. About 1,300,000 words (the 1979 edition ran to only 730,000). Over 4,360 entries (formerly 2,800). Over 2kg on the internationally accepted Langford Bathroom Scale. Over 2,900 author entries (formerly 1817). One picture, on the jacket (formerly lots). 2¾" thick. Price £45.00, and worth it for the brilliant entry on Ansibles alone, not to mention kindly "contributing editor" Brian Stableford's

habit of cross-referencing everything to my and his *The Third Millennium* if not *The Science in Science Fiction*. ("GIANT MUTANT SPACE GOATS," a typical theme entry might run, "are notably not predicted by David LANGFORD and Brian STABLEFORD in...") But I gather that Roz Kaveney was incensed to find no cross-reference from her entry to – her own coinage – BIG DUMB OBJECTS. My lawyers have advised me not even to smile.

One last snag arose. Much initial hassle had resulted because the 1979 edition was recorded on ancient eight-inch floppy disks decipherable only by Granada typesetting machines long since scrapped... so the whole text had to be typed in afresh for revision. "This must never happen again," swore technical editor John Grant. In due course, after the *Encyclopaedia* went to press, the final text on disk was urgently needed for the coming Nimbus CD-ROM edition – whereupon publishers Little, Brown nervously explained that all the enormously many galley and page-proof corrections had been entered only on the typesetter's disks, and not on anything the editors or Nimbus could themselves read. The only thing we learn from history...

That *Lawsuit*: Games Workshop's injunction against Bantam/Transworld concerning the trademarked "Dark Future" title (see past columns, *passim*) was upheld on appeal. At one stage GW got a ticking-off from the court for being "disingenuous in the extreme," and they ended up having to pay half their own costs. Meanwhile, a linked case is tackling the question of whether a plain English phrase like "Dark Future" should rightly have been granted trademark status in the first place. I see no end to all this. The lawyers are having enormous fun, and everyone else loses.

*Apostrophe Watch, Continued.* The well-known "quality" paperback imprint Picador sends a release on Jim Crace's *Arcadia*, gleefully passed on by our editor: "...a celebration of the city, it's energy, it's optimism, it's scale and it's capacity to re-generate itself despite the deprivations which flourish in it's secrets."

*Vanity Phone Numbers.* Did you know that Fred Clarke, brother of the more famous Arthur, has a local telephone number of 2001?



# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

Let's first deal briskly with the sorry-but-it-has-to-be-said: *Dust Devil* is badly written, grimly acted, and wears its portentous aspirations like a set of concrete overshoes. Deprived this time round of behind-scenes script assist from the mighty Tharg, Richard Stanley has recycled the basic narrative infrastructure of his earlier *Hardware* (unstoppable inhuman slasher thing stalking leggy actress and methodically dicing all intervening males) with a new and incomparably more interesting set of issues, images, and ideas. But the plot is a shambles, the big ideas barely legible even in the two-hour director's vanity cut, and his gift for characters and dialogue seems to have regressed to the egg. ("You're not running from something, are you? Just looked like you were running from something.") Chelsea Field and the normally-excellent Robert Burke look fabulous in their variously arresting dunewear till the moment they open their mouths and this stuff comes out; of the principals, only Zakes Mokae as the under-written detective manages to rise above the amateur-Australian level of the supporting players. Dire Ed Wood voiceovers attempt to fill in the spaces in meaning and motive ("An old man cancerous with guilt," &c.), many of them incomprehensible to the point of sublimity: "The desert knows her name now... Beyond the horizon, a tapestry unfolding of all the avenues of evil and all of history set ablaze..."

So what on earth makes this total hyena's breakfast one of the most likable and exhilarating films to have emerged all year, and its well-chronicled struggle to an all-too-brief pre-video theatre release a small but cheerable victory for the forces of light? Not, I think, the admittedly stunning Namib vistas, which have actually been seen before to comparable effect in immeasurably worse movies like *Skeleton Coast* and *Red Scorpion*, and generally with a rather lighter touch on the filters than *Dust Devil* finds to its taste. Nor is it much to do with Stanley's own undeniably strong sense of image, let alone his over-insistent and largely gratuitous homages to a range of art-pulp cinematic influences from Leone to *Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires*. Rather, what makes this otherwise fairly video-première material so unexpectedly thrilling is its

bold, maybe suicidal, attempt to do a kind of *Unconquered Country* for southern Africa: a genre fantasy that tries to find a wholly new way of distilling a history of atrocity so vast and terrible that the Western imagination instinctively resists both the attempt to apprehend it and the acknowledgment of its own share of the responsibility. It obviously goes without saying that the specific idea of trying to tell the experience of frontline Africa through a patchwork of B-pic genres (spaghetti western, road movie, supernatural serial slasher, *ad inf.*) is completely bonkers, and that even if *Dust Devil*'s impossible ambitions came off there'd be no audience anyway for such a bizarre mixture of art-house political chiller and video-première slashpic. But the subject, and the ambitions, are simply so huge that it's impossible for everything to get buried in the prevailing nonsense.

And Namibia is without doubt an extraordinary subject: a surreal land of impossible beauty and violence that makes the rest of the planet look just pitifully tame, with an inheritance of horrors that mirrors, only more extremely, the legacy of its alarming neighbour. Behind the present-day pastel vistas of dunes, diamonds, and canyons, of Benetton people, Bavarian beer and cheesecake, and picturesque German colonial architecture, lurks an eerie world of small arms and razorwire, seaside towns full of barely-incognito Nazis, astounding Afrikaner-supremacist commando comics (I think the one glimpsed in the interrogation scene is *Rocco de Wet: Grensvegter*, about a heroic South African border guard's bi-monthly war against the encroachment of black socialism), terrible country singers ("Namibia, Namibia/It's a beautiful country by far/Where the sun peels your nose and the glare makes you wince/And the friendly Namibians give a hearty 'tot siens!'"), baffling tinned vegetables ("All Gold WATERBLOMMELTJIES. Ingredients: waterblommeltjies and salt"), and Windhoek's own Black & White Sundae (2 scoops chocolate, 1 scoop vanilla). The whole country hums with weirdness, from the closed diamond city of Oranjemund (a slightly less realistic prototype of the Village) to the particular legend Stanley's opted to

pick up, the serial killer Nhadipe, whose bizarre myth has here been rather beautifully elaborated and cinematized to carry some ambitious, intricate ideas about the land and its nightmares.

*Dust Devil*'s storyline is carefully located at an intersection between a single momentous turning-point of its human history (Namibia's rebirth as an independent nation in 1990) and the timeless, pre-human harshness of the land as embodied in the figure of the Dust Devil, a primeval spirit being trapped in flesh and history until he can free himself by completing a chain of blood rituals. The white strand of the ramshackle plot is Field's attempt to escape SA and her thuggish husband by taking off across the border into the Namib; the parallel black thread is Mokae's liberal local copper, trying to catch up with the killer before his own ghosts get to him first, and (given the neat plot rule that the Dust Devil only kills those who want to die) the convergence of the plotlines invites us to guess in advance which, if any, of these characters has anything to live for. It would be an awful lot better if the characters' complex backstories and emotional scars were a bit less superficially applied, but the resonances are there – with the killer coming to stand for both the underlying brutality of the land and the ancient ghosts that independence is desperately trying to lay to rest (as we're reminded by an unsubtle stream of radio bulletins on the state of the power transition, economy, weather, post-card rock formations, and anything else deemed remotely significant).

Obviously there's far too much weight here for this kind of flimsy genre storyline to bear, and I could sympathize with anyone who felt the whole attempt was so pretentious and meretricious as to cheapen the very issues it tries to explore. But I don't think anyone could disagree that this is the first film about South Africa to try to get past the kind of worthy hand-wringing realism that normally goes with the subject, aiming to hit both a different kind of emotional and imaginative nerve and an altogether different kind of film audience. The finished product may not catch any of these targets more than a glancing blow, but there's still been nothing quite like this since the early Peter



Weir (*The Last Wave*, in particular, seems to have been somewhere in mind), which actually seems rather soft by comparison. A touch less gothic hubris, the services of a decent script doctor, and a few more well-aimed clips round the actors' ears might have worked an authentic miracle.

Witness Sally Potter's **Orlando**, which by dint of all three has managed to get away with a good deal more from what I can't help feeling is actually a good deal less. Overt art-house claims and literary credentials have doubtless smoothed the path here, but once you peel away all the sumptuousness-by-numbers (big HOUSES! big SKIRTS! big HAIR !) there's frankly not much of either left beneath. Though the first three quarters stick quite closely to the narrative and even the chapter-structure of the novel (with smug new theme-titles like "Death," "Politics," and "Sex"), Potter's decision to make Orlando's story centrally about gender amounts to a considerable rewriting, even erasure, of its central subject. For, insofar as Mrs Woolf's happy nonsense story was ever about anything at all other than what a jolly striking wench is Vita Sackville-West, it's surely more than anything else about *literature*: about the bittersweet relationship between letters and life, the joy and foolishness of words and writing and the glorious hazards of trying to live one's own history around them or to record another's through them.

Though the novel is careful to avoid any explicit rationale for Orlando's longevity or transformation, Woolf's Orlando is above all a writer, a Peter Pan poet who simply takes an awfully long time to grow up, and changes gender on what amounts to little more than a fateful caprice. Other writers – indeed, other characters in the book – turn out to suffer the same condition, which is no ageless immortality (it's vital to the novel that Orlando *does* in fact age twenty years over the three centuries of its timespan) but just a very unreliable relationship with time. Potter's character, however, is quite differently constructed and motivated: he stops his biological clock at the command of England's most beloved ageing queen, and opts out of masculinity when he twigs (after a century-plus, mind) that war is utterly horrid and all down to that nasty testosterone which he will hence forswear. And in the book, Orlando's curiously dull, even while perfectly eventful, career is itself very largely a consequence of her lingering dalliance with literature; the film leaves itself no such excuse, and ends up with a hero/ine of scarcely any human colour or interest whatever (qualities not normally boosted by the casting of Tilda Swinton, nor are they here).



Robert Burke & Chelsea Field in 'Dust Devil'

Meanwhile, Orlando's relationship to the reader has also been quite severely recast. Arguably the most appealing figure in the novel is actually the voice of Orlando's anonymous, ironic biographer, who interprets Orlando invisibly to the reader; but in the film Orlando is the author of her own biography and colludes (in the shifts from third person to first, and of course in that famous look) directly and knowingly with the audience. It's not at all a bad idea in itself, but it's something quite different, and what we get is a version that preserves Woolf's storyline for its passing ironies of gender rather than the whimsical reflections on English literature and the writing life it was originally devised to sustain. It's certainly a pleasant film, hard to dislike, that looks great and much of the time finds ways to circumvent its director's evident limitations (such as the inability to write scenes that hold the attention for more than six lines of dialogue); best when it can use VW closely, and only rarely good when it tries to supplement or mimic her (though top marks for "I can think of only three words to describe the female sex, none of which is worth expressing"). But it's served right by the way its one cheeky segment of Greenaway pastiche has backfired in sober and unfavourable comparisons of the whole picture, because for all the fine work by the man's own designers and script consultant it still manages to be complete tosh in a way that real Greenaway never entirely is. And for all its wit, literariness, and intellectual flair, qualities *Dust Devil* wouldn't particularly want to know, it still manages to slump to the same style of vacuous v/o at its increasingly tiresome climax: "She is no longer trapped by destiny... Ever since she let go of the past she

finds that her life is beginning..." Yes, thank you, Sally; have you met Richard? "There is no good or evil, only spirit and matter; either movement toward the light or away from it... Our world is just an interruption of the beam, a projected image caught for an instant on an upraised hand..." I'll leave you two to chat.

To see how much the visionary indies still have to learn about sheer professionalism, you only need turn to the shameless and largely flawless **Forever Young**, an uplifting demonstration of bare-arsed Hollywood daftness at its most completely uninhibited and irresistible. Managing somehow to seem comfortingly familiar, derivative and predictable even while coining the potentially revolutionary new subgenre of sf weepie, it's easily the most inspired of the current crop of Housewife's Choice movies (those in which e.g. Robert Redford pays your husband a MILLION DOLLARS so he can sleep with you, or in this case Mel Gibson walks into your dysfunctional kitchen to punch out your ex, fix your leaky roof, and cram a whole lifetime's fathering into a couple of days with your ten-year-old). No ancient movie ploy to send shares in Scotties through the roof has been spared in this astounding knockout brew: the tragic roadsmash, the coma, the irreversible wasting ailment, the wrinkled lovers reunited after half a century apart, all are here. And never have so many explanation scenes been so deftly elided, gabbled through, drowned under swelling music, or cut past altogether ("Mom, I'm not making this up!"); never have so many daft bumps of plotting been negotiated with quite such expert stunt-driver

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# By Permit Only

Terry Bisson

**“W**hat about the environmental costs?” my boss asked. My boss, Mr Manning, always thinks about the environment. He’s Personal Paints’ Environmental Control Officer. Every company has one these days.

“That’s the beauty of it, Manning,” the salesman told him. (At least, I thought he was a salesman.) “Our system keeps costs low by using the scientific straight-through smokestack style that is the latest in environmental off-load technology. The fumes go directly into the atmosphere —”

“What? You want me to release the poisonous by-products of Personal Paints directly into the atmosphere, and you say there are no environmental costs?”

“I didn’t say no, I said low,” the salesman said (at least, he talked like a salesman). “As you know, pollution is legal these days as long as it is properly licensed and paid for. And the new administration has lowered the toxic particulate fee to 25 cents a ton. If you factor in your capital improvements credit, and the discount you get if you buy the new smokestack from a US company, you will save up to forty percent the first year over your current smoke scrubber system. Which doesn’t do all that damn much good anyway, judging from what I see out the window.”

“Hmrrrrrr! Well, you’ve got a point there. Are you getting all this down, Miss, Miss —”

“Mrs, and it’s Robinson,” I said, trying to ignore Mr Manning’s hand on my thigh. His sexual harassment permit (on file at the main office) didn’t cover actual genital contact, so I didn’t have to worry about him going much higher, thank God. “I’m writing it right here on my steno pad.” (Recycled paper; I do my part.)

“It’s all covered in the literature I gave you, anyway,” the salesman went on (I was still thinking he was a salesman). “Unrestricted atmospheric off-load is only one element of a total waste-management system that also includes unlimited solid debris dispersal and full-flow aquatic effluent elimination, all for one low EPA fee.”

(EPA! So he was a government man.)

“Well, now, you talk a good game,” Mr Manning said. “But can you help with our solid-waste disposal crisis? We’re talking heaps of stuff here.”

“With our new accounting system, you no longer spend precious pennies trucking trash all over creation looking for legal landfills,” the Environmental Protection Agency representative (for that was what he was) said. “You pay a one-time pollution penalty fee and pile the shit in a big fucking heap on the poor side of town.”

**“I** like that,” said Mr Manning. “But what about the sticky, stinky stuff? We have oodles of ordure that emit radioactive steam and drool dioxins directly into the groundwater. You’re going to let us dump this anywhere we want?”

“No, we have a responsibility to protect the public,” said the EPA rep. “The real stinky stuff, you dump it in the woods.”

“I like that too,” said Mr Manning. “But what about the endangered species? You wouldn’t believe the grief we get from the environmental do-gooders lately.”

“Forget them,” said the EPA rep. “If we listened to them, we’d be up to our assholes in owls.”

“I thought it was eyebrows,” I said.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it,” said Mr Manning, his prowling paw pausing at the hem of my panties, where his permit ran out. “Just be sure you’re getting all this down.”

“It’s all covered in the literature I gave you, anyway,” said the EPA agent. “Since there are no endangered species left, the ES fees have been waived. That makes our direct environmental penalty payment cash plan even more attractive. According to the most conservative figures —”

While he droned on, I looked out the window. Mr Manning’s twenty-third floor office commanded a beautiful view of the river, looking with its gleaming oil slicks like Joseph’s coat of many colours. (I read the Bible every day. Do you?)

The EPA rep was showing Mr Manning a four-colour picture of a 36-inch pipe. “The beauty of a scientific straight-through system is that it never clogs and rarely backs up,” he said. “The effluents are taxed once only and dumped directly into the river, which runs conveniently into the sea. It’s like a pay toilet.”

“This guy’s a poet,” mused Mr Manning, running his hand along the crack that separated my trim buttocks. I tried to ignore him (jobs are scarce these days) and kept looking out the window. It was a gorgeous day. You could almost see the sky. The radioactive dump across town glowed warmly, reminding me of home. Since the dump was in my neighbourhood, the high-geiger penalty fee (we called it clickety-clink, or mutation money) had provided bonus burial benefits for five of my six children.

“Plus, it’s all plenty patriotic, since one hundred percent of the environmental penalty payment goes directly into the US treasury, and not to some high-tech Jap clean-up scam,” the EPA rep said, winding up his spiel.



"I like that," said Mr Manning.

I sneaked a glance at my watch. My chronically underemployed husband, Big Bill, would be waiting impatiently for me to get home to cook supper for himself and our last remaining child, the hideously deformed, demented little cripple, Tiny Tim.

It was 4.59. Mr Manning and the EPA rep were still working out the details of the quarterly pollution payment plan, which meant I would have to work late, whether I wanted to or not.

Of course, I would get paid overtime.

**F**inally, at 5.59, the papers were signed and I headed home. The stairs were crowded but the elevator was almost empty. Lots of people are afraid to take the elevator, after the terrifying accidents of the past few weeks, but just knowing the inspection certificate is on file in the building superintendent's office (even if we're not allowed to see it) is enough for me.

The expressway was bumper-to-bumper with the big-finned fifties replicas that are popular now that leaded gasoline is available again. They were pumping pollution into the magenta-coloured air, but that was all right, since the carbon fees eased the tax burden for working wives like me.

Besides, I'm more than just a wife – I'm a mother. It warmed my heart to think of all the ethyl-penalty bucks going into the HEW budget, helping to pay for the remedial education of my learning-dislocated, double-dyslexic, deranged little boy, Tiny Tim.

I drove only half listening to the ads and to Howard Stern, who was back on the air – his station had apparently purchased another obscenity overload authorization. Traffic was slowed almost to a crawl near the airport. At first I feared it was another crash (which can tie up the turnpike for hours) but it was only a set of landing gear that had fallen onto the highway. This was happening more and more lately since the Federal Aeronautics Board had started selling maintenance waivers to the airlines to augment the FAB retirement fund.

I was glad to see the lights of our peaceful suburb, Memorial Elms. My pleasure was spoiled a little (but only a little) by the cross burning in the park. It looked as if the KKK had purchased another bias licence – not as expensive as actual violence permits. The lynching last week must have cost them a pretty penny (if you can use the word "pretty" for such a grim event).

It was almost nine when I pulled into the drive. I knew I would be in trouble, so I hesitated at the door as long as I could – until I started to gag on the stench from our next-door neighbour's pigpen. It's a terrible odour, but what could we do? Mrs Bush had paid her faeces fees, and the money went to lower our property taxes, after all. Plus, her animals were not eaten but tortured to death for science, and I knew that these experiments were helping improve the quality-of-life of my terminally-twisted, pus-encrusted semi-psychotic son, Tiny Tim.

Barbara (I will not call her Babs!) was in her doorway, waving a rubber glove, but I didn't wave back. Not to be snotty, but I hate it when ordinary people take on the airs of giant corporations.

"Where the hell you been, bitch!" Big Bill muttered.

He took another swig of gin (ignoring the label, which said, WARNING, DRINKING ALCOHOL MAKES SOME PEOPLE ACT UGLY). In fact, he grabbed my ass, and when I pulled away he made a fist like Ralph Cramden (don't you love those old shows?) and pointed not toward the Moon but toward his framed wife-beating authorization certificate hanging on the wall over the dinette table, next to our marriage licence.

**I**gnoring his antics, I put the chicken in the oven, slamming the door quickly against the smell. I wondered how old it was but there was no way to tell. The expiration date was covered by an official USDA late-penalty override sticker, and it's against the law to pull them off, like mattress tags.

Where was Tiny Tim? Just then I heard automatic weapons fire (everybody has a permit these days) and he burst in the door; or rather, rolled in, his face all bloody and his wheelchair bent out of shape.

"Where have you been?" I asked. (As if I didn't know! He's had to travel through a bad neighbourhood lately, ever since the town floated a bond issue to buy a permit allowing them to bypass the handicapped access laws.)

"Got mugged," he said, spitting broken teeth into one claw-like, grasping little hand.

"Who did it?" said his dad. "I'll kill them!"

"They had their papers, Pop!" whined our bruised, battered, blubbing baby boy. "They whipped them out and waved them in my face, and then it was whack whack whack!"

"Poor kid," I said, trying not to look at him. Never a pretty child, he looked even worse than usual. Instead, I looked out the window at the sunset. They say sunsets are better now than ever, now that pollution is controlled. Certainly they are colourful as all hell (if you'll pardon my French!).

"God damn them every one," Tiny Tim said, wrinkling what was left of his button nose. "What's for supper, chicken again?"

And that's the end of my story. If you don't like it, fuck you. Please direct any complaints to the New York office of the National Writer's Union, Plot Department, where my Climax Bypass Permit Number 5944 is on file.

Fee paid.

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**Terry Bisson**, who lives in New York, last contributed to *Interzone* with the short story "Are There Any Questions?" (issue 62). Both that and the above piece will appear in his first collection, *Bears Discover Fire & Other Stories*, due out from Tor Books in the USA in October 1993.

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# A Brief History of Everything

Prof. John D. Barrow interviewed by Paul McAuley

**C**osmology, once a backwater populated almost exclusively by obscure Russians, is now one of the hottest areas of science. In the past ten years a combination of particle physics, satellite astronomy and supercomputers has doubled our knowledge of the Universe. Books popularizing these discoveries, written by the very scientists at the forefront of exploring the origins and structure of the Universe, are appearing on the bestseller lists. At the same time, humanists – most notably Mary Midgeley and Bryan Appleyard – have accused scientists of the most appalling crimes of élitism and hubris, of trying to write religion out of the picture or, even worse, of trying to supplant God. There is, after all, the infamous last sentence of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which suggested that to understand why the Universe exists, and why we exist in it, is to understand the mind of God.

John Barrow, Professor of Astronomy at Sussex University, takes a relaxed view of the renewed clash between Britain's two cultures, and finds it ironic that these criticisms have only arisen because of the upsurge of popularizing by scientists.

"It's no longer just the output from journalists or ghostwriters, but scientists themselves on the forefront of various research activities have started writing books about what they're engaged in. One of the attractions about Stephen Hawking's book is that here is someone at the forefront of some scientific investigation writing about what's going on in a field of work that's unsolved. In the past, books tended to be written after the event, such as *The Double Helix*, just telling the story of what happened."

Barrow himself is a paradigm of the new type of science popularizer. His last two books, *Theories of Everything*, and *Pi in the Sky*, have dealt with problems scientists have had in trying to describe the entire Universe in terms of simple sets of equations, and of the history and nature of mathematics. His collaboration with Frank Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, a *vade mecum* for any aspiring radical hard sf writer (and an

important inspiration for my novel *Eternal Light*), put forward the theory that the Universe is as old and as large and as structured as it is because if it were otherwise we wouldn't be around to observe it, and contained daring yet closely argued speculations on the limits to the evolution and survival of intelligent life.

**B**arrow brings to his popularizations a wide-ranging intelligence – he can quote Umberto Eco or Karl Marx alongside Kurt Gödel or Karl Popper – an engaging refreshingly unstuffy enthusiasm, and an ability to sustain the reader's interest through closely argued accounts from simple propositions to their complex often undecidable outcomes – or vice versa.

*Theories of Everything* is an example of the latter, for the goal of some physicists is to, as Barrow puts it, "Write down a mathematical equation that describes the world in some sense, and write it on your T-shirt." This sounds awfully like the wish-fulfillment plots of ancient space operas – grasp the key of the Universe, and the Empire (and the Princess) will be yours! Barrow, who in his book demonstrates that it isn't possible to write a complete Theory of Everything, sees this enthusiasm for explaining everything as a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon.

"Near the end of the last century the director of the Prussian patent office made an application to close his office because he thought that all the useful inventions had been made. The young Max Planck, when he decided he would like to become a research student in physics, was told that all the interesting discoveries had been made in physics and that he should go and work in biology or chemistry. So in recent years there has been a lot of enthusiasm and reporting of at least the terminology of a theory of everything, and discussion by people like Steve Hawking that perhaps the end of physics was in sight. What physicists mean by a theory of everything is very different from what is understood by such a term by ordinary people in the street. One motivation [in writing the book] was to try and make very clear what physicists mean by a theory of

everything, and how if you had such a theory of everything, if it was one hundred per cent complete by physicists' standards, what you would still require to still understand all the things we see around us, and in particular the sorts of things that an ordinary person feels are unusual and worthy of being understood – ourselves for example.

"When you talk to physicists they start telling you how wonderfully simple the world is and that it is a beautifully symmetrical mathematical system if you look at it in the right mathematical way. But the ordinary person knows that the world is not simple and harmonious and symmetrical but a vast higgledepiggledy mess of very complicated things, whether you look at your children's bedrooms or things in the living world, or look at ourselves or our own psychology and physiology, or look at how our societies or economies are organized. If you talk to a biologist they won't make any mention of simplicity or symmetry or mathematical laws of nature; all that matters for them is whether something is persistent, whether it is stable and wins out in the long run. So the results of natural selection don't have to be simple or symmetrical – they just have to be consistent. There is this fundamental dichotomy in people's minds – a dilemma between physicists telling them the world is simple whereas it is manifestly very complicated.

"The resolution of this problem is that the world can be governed by very simple laws of nature, yet the outcome of these laws do not have to possess the same simplicities and symmetries and patterns as the laws themselves. This is in some sense the secret of the universe – the fact that the outcomes of the laws of nature, of which you and I are complicated examples, don't have to have the same symmetries and patterns as the laws themselves. So this is how we can have a universe governed by simple laws and yet manifest extremely complicated states and outcomes. The particle physicist is searching for the succinct version or encapsulation of these laws – the biologist or sociologist is looking at the collection of complicated outcomes.



"It also teaches us that if we knew all the laws of nature, the theory of everything the physicists are searching for, we wouldn't necessarily be able to understand all the outcomes of the laws and all the complexity that arises from those outcomes. So this is one point I was keen to get across, how the search for Theories of Everything is a search for the laws of nature – but the things that we see around us, the outcomes of the laws, do not possess the same simplicities, and even if we knew all the laws, we wouldn't necessarily be able to explain or predict all the structures in the world."

**D**espite these limitations, cosmologists have made tremendous strides in understanding the evolution of the Universe using computer modelling. Are there limits to how deeply scientists can probe the events at the beginning of the Universe?

"Cosmologists have a good understanding of the average overall pattern of expansion of the Universe. What we don't have a good picture of are the details of how all the lumps and bumps within it arose – why galaxies have the shapes and sizes that they do; whether they form before bigger clusters of galaxies or afterwards. We don't have a compelling single theory for all the fine details, but a number of rival theories, and observations of ripples in space [recent data from the COBE satellite, which showed asymmetric structures in the early Universe], which is really providing a photograph of the Universe in radio waves when it was a million years old. What you see there are the embryonic lumps and bumps that eventually amplify to become galaxies and bigger structures; so we get a snapshot of them as they were in their youth. So it's as if someone had arrived from outer space and been shown millions of old people and had to figure out how these people emerged and grew – but then he manages to get his hands on a snapshot of a children's maternity ward and gets a look at what those people were like when they were very young. What we lack is the movie of what happened in between and people try to make that movie by computer simulations.

"What's interesting about modern cosmology is that it signals a new way of doing science, and that is not just with pencil and paper, or just by observing things, but by producing large computer simulations of what's going on. So people have been attempting to simulate the process whereby the first stars and galaxies started to coagulate, and become denser and produce the shapes and sizes that we see, with certain assumed starting conditions. And then they just try to see whether the final states in the patterns produced match what we see, to pin down what the starting states



might have been. The COBE observations give you a glimpse of what the starting state was almost – so far the published observations are not accurate enough to pin it down, but they have another one and a half years of data, so the information still to come is much more accurate than what's been revealed, and presumably the investigators won't reveal it until they have extracted the most dramatic theoretical consequences for themselves.

"There's a wider point about this computer simulation. In ancient times people thought of the Universe as a living entity, and then Pythagoras and Plato thought of it as a mathematical system, and Newton and his followers as a vast clockwork mechanism, and the Victorians as a heat engine, and so

on. These aren't coincidences; they are tied to aspects of technology, the emergence of the pendulum clock in Newton's time, the industrial revolution and steam engines give you the heat death of the Universe. In modern times we've suddenly got this image of the Universe as a vast computer, which has emerged at the same time as the computer evolution, and this leads to all sorts of speculative avenues in which one can develop both fictional and non-fictional pictures of the Universe. We can ask what the next paradigm will be – it will probably grow out of some aspect of virtual reality.

"Already, mathematicians have started to develop new ways of exploring mathematical truths. Not just by



trying to prove theorems, but by building a virtual reality in which the geometry is governed by particular unusual rules and regulations. Then you place yourself inside this simulation and look around to see if your theories and conjectures are true or not. So you do observational mathematics by creating a world that's governed by particular rules. In my new book [*Pi in the Sky*] I invent a fictional scenario where we make contact with an extraterrestrial civilization by accident; we intercept some of their signals and then are able to tap into the archives of their societies' libraries and people get the first wave of information back which is a list of contents of their mathematical reference books. At first there's enormous excitement because they have listings of what appear to be solutions to all the great unsolved problems of mathematics – Fermat's last problem, Goldbach's problem and so on. So people call a convention on the date when they know the next batch of files is going to arrive and these files are going to provide proofs of these great theorems.

"But when the files arrive, people are enormously disappointed. They discover that this very advanced civilization has a mathematics quite different from ours. They're not really interested in proof, but do all their mathematics empirically by computer search through billions and billions of cases. So if after studying a hundred trillion examples of sets of numbers they find what we call Pythagoras's Theorem always holds good, then they call it 'true,' just as we call Newton's Law of Gravity 'true,' even though we haven't seen every apple fall, but enough to assume that all others will behave the same. The aliens do their mathematics in this same way, and because their computer technology is very advanced they can search for things very efficiently. They know about proof as a curiosity, and they know it's limited by things like Gödel's Theorem. But the computer search isn't so limited; it can jump out of the logical deductive process. So we might speculate that if advanced civilizations exist, or our own evolves in a dramatically different way, the way in which mathematics is done might become very different."

**I** suggest that this conjures up a scenario of computer hobbyists doing pure mathematics by wandering around virtual realities looking for "beauty." A rather bizarre notion, considering that pure mathematics is held to be the most difficult of all sciences, but Barrow sees it as a natural development.

"Amateur astronomers make important contributions to astronomy with particular sorts of problems which require long-term study of a particular

system. It used to be thought that the main business of maths was theorems and proofs, but in the study of the complicated outcomes of the laws and equations, things like chaos and complexity have been found. And there is scope for this kind of experimental mathematics. Fractals are the best known example."

One of the interesting ideas in *Theories of Everything* – especially as an sf writer – was that the Universe may have evolved in different directions from the same initial conditions, and I asked Barrow to elaborate on that. Could we travel from one set of laws and physical constants to another?

"We're used to thinking of space and time as a four-dimensional ball and we're living on its surface, which is very smooth. Then physicists speculated that there's no reason why it should be as simple as that – there may be all sorts of handles or crenellations of great intricacy – and they discovered that these irregularities can determine the constants of nature. So you could have many large balls of space joined by tubes – so-called wormholes – with many intricate connections between the wormholes. Each region of space would have its constants and overall structure determined by the network of connections to it, so the nature of physics would be very different from region to region.

"You might imagine the initial conditions of the Universe to be a vast, interconnected, very complex network of worlds that could have its own organized complexity. You could imagine the interconnected worlds are as complex as a living system. What makes us living and self-interacting is just the complexity of the neural interconnections, so the circuitry of these worlds could be sufficiently complicated to give rise to life. Science-fiction writers, as far as I know, haven't started to explore these wormhole-connected worlds – there's a lot of scope for examining questions like: what is meant by a series of complex interacting worlds? What new types of phenomena can emerge from the complex interactions between them? Just as you can wire together a collection of atoms to produce a human brain and a whole new realm of phenomena, what would happen if these worlds were 'wired' together in a complicated way by wormhole connections? What sorts of things would emerge? One can only speculate."

**B**arrow's new book, *Pi in the Sky*, extends *Theories of Everything's* investigation into the nature of mathematics and its relationship with the Universe of things, asking deep questions on the origins of counting, and whether or not mathematics has a separate existence. Is there such a thing as "mathematics space"?

"There's been a lot of interest in this Platonic idea that mathematics exists 'out there' and we discover it – it would exist even without mathematicians. Penrose's book *The Emperor's New Mind* is based very firmly on the belief that mathematics exists somewhere, but he avoids asking all the awkward questions such as if it does exist 'out there' how do we make contact with mathematical truth? Are we saying that mathematicians can tune in to this other world and non-mathematicians can't?

"The other ideas I like to pursue go back to this computer image. Suppose we are astronomers trying to predict how galaxies form by building a big simulation of how little masses cluster together. We can imagine in the far future building bigger and more detailed simulations showing stars and planets forming, adding rules of biochemistry to see replicating molecules forming on these planets, and then living things able to communicate with one another in simulation. For all practical purposes they would believe themselves alive and we would be sitting on the outside looking at this simulation. We might then ask the question: what are these living things? Well, they are really just pieces of information in the program, and if we changed the hardware they would still exist. So we could take the last step and do away with computer hardware altogether. Suppose we think of mathematics as being a vast web, with axioms at the bottom and a deductive network rising up from it to produce all the truths of mathematics. Mathematics clearly allows the existence of entities like ourselves, and somewhere in that vast web of mathematical truths, there are entities like ourselves which can communicate in some way with other entities in the mathematical formalism, and as such they seem to be alive in every sense of the word even if they don't have any physical manifestation. So there is this rather curious conclusion that anything that can exist in mathematics does exist in reality.

"One of my interests is to pursue this picture. The old problem with Platonism is that there is the mathematical other world and there's this material world around us, with everything in it a pale reflection of perfect things in the mathematical world. People worry about the relationship between the two. Most people get around this by doing away with the other world and saying that what you see is what you get. Another angle is to argue that all you have is the mathematical world, the Platonic world, and we are just very complex structures that inhabit this world. We are like software – you shouldn't try and think there's any hardware. It's not a completely worked out idea but it's an



interesting direction in which to move. It's a logical conclusion of studying the world using simulations and saying, well, suppose the simulations got better and better."

**F**inally, the end. The end of the Universe, that is. I find it fascinating that Olaf Stapledon, in *Star Maker* (1937), wrote about the final evolution of intelligence into the Universal Overmind, an intuitive conclusion that was very similar to Barrow and Tipler's conclusions derived from seeing how far they could push the physics of information processing.

"In fact it's much more difficult to predict the future than to determine the structure of the Universe in the past. The reason is very simple – as you go backwards in time everything gets hotter and denser and approaches a state of thermal equilibrium, the physics of which are easy to unravel. But in the future you get farther and farther from equilibrium, and far-from-equilibrium physics is on the frontier of unsolved problems.

"The speculative line we took in *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* was to take a lesson from computer science and complexity theory, to try and define living systems as information processors. One advantage of that is there are some fairly precise mathematical results that you can produce, and you can ask the question – can information processing continue indefinitely? And it turns out that it can. Even if the Universe ends in a Big Crunch it's possible (in principle) for an infinite amount of information to be processed before it does. The other thing we discovered, of general philosophical interest, is that ever since the turn of the century there's been a notion of the heat death of the Universe: that if the Universe were to expand forever, it would settle into a great uniform sea in which everything would reach the same temperature, an equilibrium where life can't exist. And this fuelled all sorts of pessimistic philosophy and theology, and probably science fiction as well. But in fact, when you look at things closely, it turns out that the basis of this pessimistic tradition is false. It is quite true that the level of disorder – the entropy – of the Universe is increasing, but the maximum entropy the Universe can have at any time is also increasing, and it's increasing faster than the actual entropy. So, as time goes on we are moving farther and farther from equilibrium, and away from the heat death. So the potential for organization, the amount of free energy available for organization, is actually increasing. We tried to sketch a scenario in which you could exploit that to store information in simple subatomic systems such as electron and positron pairs. This creates a Turing

# Pi in the Sky

## COUNTING, THINKING, AND BEING



Machine which is enough to simulate almost everything.

"The big question is whether this will or could happen in practice. Once carbon life-forms like ourselves have evolved, they are a useful catalyst for producing what may turn out to be more prolific forms of life based on silicon. And what's curious is that, years ago, there were many science-fiction stories about life based on silicon chemistry, but what seems to be happening is that it is life based on silicon physics, in the form of silicon chips and so forth, which is proving to be much more interesting and flexible."

**I**mention the possibility that buckminsterfullerenes, the football-shaped polymers constructed of sixty carbon atoms, might be as useful as silicon in constructing the ultimate life-form – after all, they are believed to be an important constituent of interstellar dustclouds and, doped with appropriate rare earths, may have superconducting properties – and this leads Barrow to reflect on the necessary incompleteness of our understanding of what might be possible.

"Another quite nice speculation applies to phenomena like high-temperature superconductors, which again is a manifestation of complexity, of organizing things. These were produced by mixing weird cocktails of

ceramic materials like yttrium and goodness knows what, just like cookery. It seems very likely that the first time this was done in Zurich a few years ago was the first time high-temperature superconductivity was manifested in the Universe. There's no reason why those magic combinations of materials should turn up in any natural form at low enough temperatures in planetary interiors or anywhere else in the Universe. I find this a very sobering thought – that all these manifestations of complex organization are just lying latent in equations.

"So we can see why our Theory of Everything is never going to tell us everything. There's an infinite sea of possible manifestations of complex organization which we can't predict in their entirety. Even if we looked at them all, we couldn't predict all the Laws of Nature; and if we knew all the laws, we couldn't predict all the outcomes."

John Barrow, *Pi in the Sky*, Oxford University Press.

John Barrow, *Theories of Everything*, Vintage.

John Barrow and Frank Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, Oxford University Press.

Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam.

Paul J. McAuley, *Eternal Light*, Orbit.

Roger Penrose, *The Emperor's New Mind*, Oxford University Press.



# Kennedy Saves the World (Again)

William Whyte

Shop Street, 8 am. Bleary-eyed students up from Dublin for the night stagger for the early coach, little realizing that it's been rescheduled to 7.30 because of roadworks at Athlone. Knots of people stand outside the shops waiting for the manager to arrive with the key. The morning sun shines somewhat unforgivingly down the street. The clock on the jeweller's is defiantly but unhelpfully telling Galway time, the manager having gone mad during the night and decided that London time is an alien import. Those students whose eyes aren't so bleary that they can't read the clock at all see the time, relax, stop running so fast and miss the next coach too.

John F. Kennedy gets up and stares out of the window of the small room on Eyre Square that he's been renting for the last thirty-odd years, his breath barely strong enough to mist the pane. He runs his fingers through that cursed beard, checks with them to see that the bald patch is still there. He expects it is. He hasn't had to maintain it artificially since 1975. He's still a little disappointed to find it, though.

A Bible lies on his bed; a medicine chest full of the most modern painkillers is screwed firmly to the wall above the sink. And padlocked. He used to give himself ten minutes between getting up and giving himself the first injection, pretending it was good for him to feel the pain for that long, but he's too old for that bullshit now. It took him a while to adjust to retirement but he's got the hang now. It's pacing yourself, doing those things you can do very slowly and carefully. It's also doping yourself with so many painkillers that you don't notice you've tripped until five minutes after you've hit the ground. That helps a lot.

He doses himself, locks the medicine chest, leaves the room, and goes out into the John F. Kennedy Memorial Park, where he wanders along the top end to salute the flag – okay, it's the Irish flag, but it does no harm to keep in practice. The students who are standing around waiting for the ten o'clock bus giggle at him briefly and then go back to bitching about the roads. He moves over to a bench and sits down, smiling at the couples (it won't last, he thinks, it won't last, you keep your eye on him or he'll be going off with Nastassia Kinski first chance he gets) and waiting for the first newspaper to be dropped in a bin. It's the *Galway Advertiser*. Oh well. At least it's not likely to have many embarrassing stories about Teddy in it.

As he sits there, reading through the small ads for prams and tractors and beds, his heart stops, but he doesn't feel anything through the haze of painkillers; he doesn't realize that he's now just a shabbily dressed

dead old man on a bench in Galway who'll sit there for four hours before someone notices the angle he's slumping at and the blankness of his stare. He doesn't realize any of this, he just sits and goes on reading the same advertisement over and over again. It offers to sell him a pram, and gives him a box number to write to. He doesn't know why he finds it so fascinating, but he reads it over and over again.

Even when, after four and a quarter hours, the medical team come with a stretcher to take away his rapidly stiffening body, he doesn't notice anything's happened. He stays sitting on the bench as they take his body away, still reading the advertisement over and over again. It seems somehow appropriate. Towards eight in the evening, night not yet fallen, he congratulates himself on how well he's paced his day and decides to go and get some food. Even when he stands up he doesn't realize that his body isn't there any more; with the painkillers he hardly ever felt the ground beneath his feet anyway, and except for that early-morning glance in the mirror he's more or less made a habit of never looking at his body. His eyesight has been misting over for the last five years and he's just been too attached to his old glasses, too stubborn, too (let's be honest here) poor to get another pair. If it had been a normal evening he probably wouldn't have noticed that his body wasn't there at all until the following morning.

As he wanders along Shop Street he notices that more people than usual are wearing white. They're all tall and youthful and blonde. It's odd. This year is one of the years when youth fashion is to wear black all over, no matter what the weather. The people in white move unconcernedly through the crowds, effortlessly passing through the currents of people, seeming to flow rather than to move in any way as mundane as walking. They seem to be looking at him a bit too closely for politeness; but then, since November 1963, anyone who's looked at him at all has seemed to be looking at him a bit too closely. He thought he'd grown out of it.

As he walks he realizes he isn't really very hungry, so he goes and sits and stares at the river in the gathering dusk. Something, something which he can't put his finger on, feels subtly different. (The reason why he can't put his finger on it is because he doesn't have a finger any more, but his body has come to disgust him so much that he's long since got out of the habit of looking at it.) A man, dressed inconspicuously in more-or-less soil-coloured clothes, sits down beside him.



"You're new here, aren't you?" he says.

Kennedy blinks at him. Funny, he thinks, that felt different. Maybe...but the thought runs away from him. "Why, no sir," he says. "I've been here 30 years, come November." And he amuses himself, as he has done so often, thinking of the expression on poor deranged Lee Oswald's face as he hears another bang while he's in the middle of re-loading, looks out the window, sees the President's head half-exploded, and realizes, or thinks he realizes, that he's been a patsy all along. It always makes Kennedy smile, thinking of it, and it does again this time; but it feels different this time again. He furrows his brow (and that, too, feels odd) and tries smiling again; and again, he can feel something happening but it doesn't feel normal. Has he had a stroke? he wonders. Can you have a stroke without noticing? The river gushes on, looking unusually full and healthy for such a dry summer.

"You'll pardon the intrusion," says the man, "but I saw you looking a bit on the disorientated side."

Kennedy has been disorientated for the last twenty-nine years. It is no surprise to hear that he's showing it. He looks at the man without speaking. The man is in his early, maybe, fifties, stubbled; his nose and chin are sharp, but his eyes are gentle. He speaks with a soft Galway accent. The lapels of his heavy coat are turned up, even though it's been a warm summer day and it's still a warm summer evening.

"I'm just tired," Kennedy says. "The heat gets to you after you've been out in it too long." But now, talking about how he feels physically, he's surprised to notice that the aches and pains that he's been living with for fifty years now, which would normally have been bursting out all over his body at this time of day as the painkillers wore off, just aren't there any more.

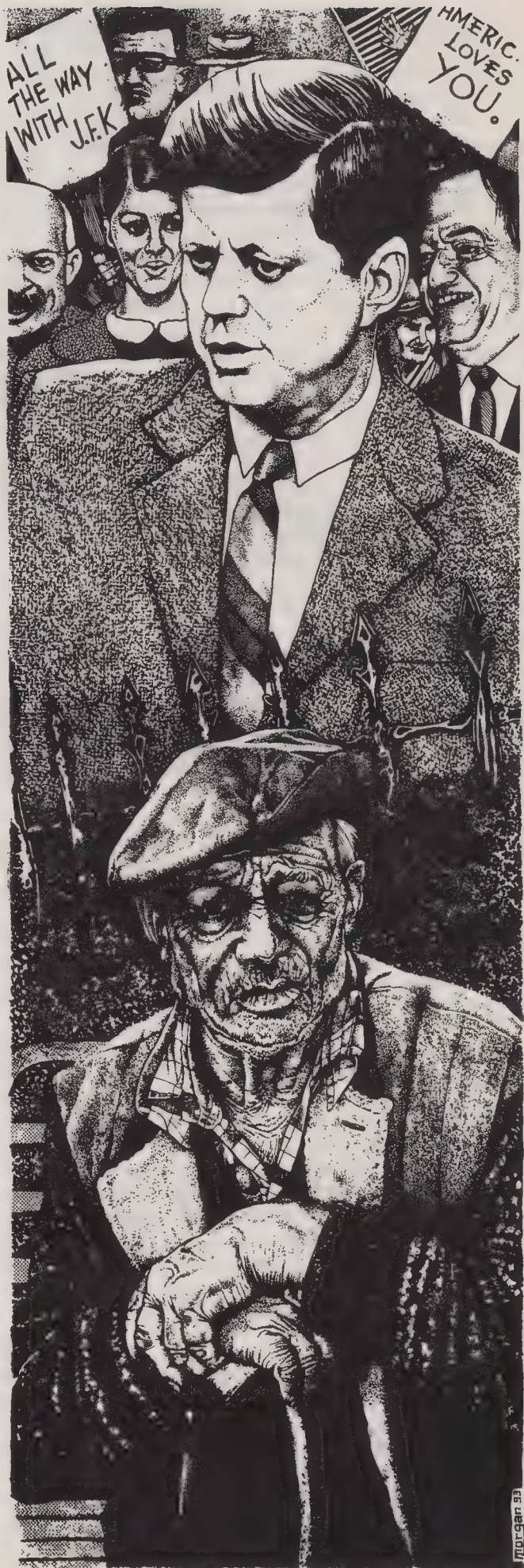
"Mr Kennedy," the man says, and that startles him. No one knows his name. In those first few hectic days he'd undergone plastic surgery so intensively he'd been sure nobody would ever recognize him again; but bone structure comes out, he supposes. The first moment's shock passes, and he is surprised to see himself not upset at all, just slightly regretful that the rules of the game have changed again, so late on in it. It's too late in my life for this kind of change, he thinks, the irony (inevitably) going right over his head. He just sits there, trying not to move a muscle and finding it unexpectedly easy.

"Mr Kennedy," the man says. "Are you sitting down?"

This is a very strange question.

"Because I have some news for you that you might not want to hear," the man continues. Kennedy braces himself for the threat of blackmail, or the news that all the well-meaning people who he'd wanted to get away from just as much as the ill-meaning people have known of his existence for years and are planning to fly him back to Washington in glory. Having prepared himself again for all the shocks that he's prepared himself for so many times over the years, he finds himself genuinely shocked when the man pauses and says, quite gently: "You're dead."

And when Kennedy recovers his bearings, he's ten feet above the chair, spinning gently in mid-air.



Illustrations by Russell Morgan



"Mr Kennedy!" the man says, still sitting just to his left. "Mr Kennedy! If you're not sitting down, you must sit down now!"

Kennedy doesn't react. He doesn't know how. He feels sensations which might be in what might be muscles leading to what might be his face, but he no longer knows what they mean. Suddenly, he's noticed that his body isn't there any more. The comforting blur which he always saw out of the corner of his eye, and which always came (more comfortably, it has to be said) into focus when he looked at it, now stays a blur no matter how hard he looks at it. A faintly glowing grey blur. And that's all. Even the river below him, which was so well-defined and healthy and, well, *there* a minute ago, is now an indistinct blue blur which bleeds gradually into the green of the grass next to it...and was the grass really that shade of green? It's amazing how badly you turn out to remember things you see every day.

"Mr Kennedy!" the man says, but Kennedy can hardly hear him, can hardly convince himself that he's hearing anything other than random noise, can hardly convince himself that the word "Kennedy" even means anything as he feels everything washing away from him. "Mr Kennedy! Concentrate on your hand! Your hand! Your hand!" He goes on repeating *hand*, insistently, over and over again, and Kennedy can't bring himself to do what he says. He thinks he feels his arms floating outstretched, away from his body, but he no longer knows anything; even when he feels his hand float back towards his line of vision, he finds himself shutting his eyes, not willing to try anything, preferring just to let his identity slowly drift away.

But then he can't stop himself looking at his hand, but he focuses way beyond it, in the middle distance, giving himself two ghost left hands floating, badly-defined, in front of his face, so at least they have an excuse for being badly defined and out of focus. And then the man, who had been intoning the word "Hand" in a regular rhythm over and over again, suddenly screams "Your Hand!" at him. The rhythm is broken. In the sudden shock Kennedy finds himself instinctively focusing on it, and suddenly, there in front of him is the hand he had when he was 40. "Damn," he says. "Damn." And as he stares at his hand in wonderment, his suited arm turns out to have been attached to it all along; and there's his right hand, as it always has been, and there he is, in a comfortable sports jacket and shirt and tie and trousers, and he's just preparing to recognize the patch of green underneath him as the White House lawn when the man next to him speaks.

"Mr Kennedy? Are you in Galway?"

"Why, no, son," the President says to this man who must surely be older than him. "I'm in..." but Galway does sound very familiar.

"Sit down on this bench, sir. Look at the river with me," the man says. "Watch the way it froths along the middle. D'you see?"

Kennedy isn't sure.

"And look at the way the colour changes, from the middle to the still water over there by the wall," the man says, pointing across the river. "Feel its life. Have you ever known anything like river water, sir? If it didn't exist, could anyone possibly imagine it?"

Kennedy stares at the still brown water along the wall on the far side of the river, which he can just make out the stones at the bottom of. But then the joy and the power of the central stream of the river draw his attention, and he finds his eyes wandering to it, and then being drawn downstream to the bridge, wandering up it to the couples leaning over seeing their own individual patterns in the water. His ghost noses in front of his eyes seem more distinct than they have for a long time; the couples on the bridge better defined, more clear and sharp. And he's suddenly glad he's in Galway, reckons he could spend the rest of his life here, it's a slower life but a better one in a lot of ways.

But the man's still staring at him. "Mr Kennedy," he says. "We need your help."

"What can I do for you, son?" Kennedy says, delighting in the new, old, sharp, clipped edge to his voice, the feeling of genuine power in his body that he hasn't felt since the war. Yes! — he thinks — yes! I could do anything now!

"Mr Kennedy," the man says. "May we walk around your town and talk?"

My town, Kennedy finds himself thinking. Yes. Anything could be mine. "Sure," he says. "I'd be interested."

They walk back up Quay Street, Middle Street, streets that Kennedy doesn't often go along but seems to remember far better than he expected. As they walk the man talks to him. "This is heaven you're in," he says. "Or an afterlife, at least. I don't know how long I've been here. And, er, I don't know what it looks like really. You've noticed yourself that when you first realized where you were you nearly lost the image of the place altogether. — Nice place, by the way. Many people, when they get here, they're so overcome by the shock that they disperse altogether. They just spread out throughout — well, 'throughout' is, er... — they just spread out. They start as a dark grey blur, and they spread out till they're so thin you can't see them. You've held together remarkably well. I'm not surprised... God forbid. It's very good, but."

Kennedy nods knowledgeably. They go past the offices of the *Galway Advertiser* and stop to stare, as Kennedy has so often, at the bad watercolour of him on the wall saying "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." He stares at his face on the painting and the identical but reversed reflection of his face in the window, and feels a wild rush of exhilaration through his blood as the man goes on talking.

"The reason why I made so sure to get to you just after you arrived... well, I'll start from the other end. God used to walk among us. He used to be everywhere, with everyone, all the time. He'd be giving support and love to you all the time... ach, I don't know how to describe it." He breaks off and stares beseechingly at Kennedy. Kennedy stares back, willing to be moved but not moved yet.

The man gropes for words. "See, it's like... there are lots of thrills in the world, there's lots of ways of getting your kicks in the short term, and you could have those here if you wanted. But there's nothing like the warmth you get from being special to one person and knowing that you've stayed with them for so long, and



knowing that you can stay with them forever. Someone infinitely supportive and loving. You know?" Kennedy glances sharply at the man, but there's no sign of irony in his voice and the question was obviously rhetorical; the man's just so caught up in groping for his meaning that he's forgotten who he is talking to. "It's that kind of warmth you have, but...but fuller and warmer and better. I can't...well, anyway. A hundred years ago. About. God went. He's no longer here. We're lost. We don't know what to do. So we've been, er," he looks embarrassed for a bit, "we've been electing someone to be God. To, well, not to be God exactly, but to be a stable point in the middle of us all, someone we can look to and know is there even if they don't do anything much of the time. But it's a hard job, and people are dispersing, and places are going. People are, just, spreading out, becoming vaguer and vaguer, and vanishing in despair. And places!" He nods at his reflection in the glass. "I haven't seen buildings this well-defined in fifty years. More."

"So what are you saying?" Kennedy asks cautiously, but he already knows. He can feel the triumph swell within his chest.

"I'd like you to consider being God," the man says. "You remember Galway so well that we can rebuild Heaven from here – it's bound to sharpen people's memories of the area around it, and we can work outwards across Ireland and the world. You have experience of power. You have experience of campaigning. You have experience of being the kind of leader who inspires total loyalty, total belief. You have a stronger sense of your own identity than anyone else here, near enough. The flame of life is burning high inside you. And you're a Catholic, which can't do us any damage. Will you do it?"

"What happens if I say yes?" Kennedy still has enough self-control to ask, but every fibre in his body is screaming YES! already.

"Well. You have to be elected."

"How does that happen?"

"I'm not sure. A consensus emerges."

Kennedy doesn't trust consensus. The man sees it in his eyes. "Don't worry about it," he says. "It's all straightforward enough."

"The important question," Kennedy says. "Is there an election due soon?"

"It...ah...it doesn't quite work that way," the man says, staring at the pavement so Kennedy can't see his face. "You see, we're not, ah, we're not burdened with the sin of Pride here. You see. So, we keep on electing God, and no-one yet has been up to it; but they all know, and they don't try to, don't try to fool themselves that they'll pick it up eventually. So you see, you're really the best hope we have. You're new here, from a harder and worse place; maybe you have a resilience that we've lost. I don't know. It's worth a try."

"The other important question, then," Kennedy says. "What's your name?"

"Uh," the man says. "Uh, Keegan. Jack Keegan."

"Pleased to meet you, Jack Keegan," Kennedy says. "My name's Jack Kennedy." And as they shake hands, he feels the power in his hands and exults.

The campaign, in the end, is totally unlike what Kennedy has been expecting. He's been looking forward, in a strange masochistic kind of way, to endless uncomfortable journeys round Heaven in a van or an aeroplane, stopping in blurred buildings to talk to blurred people in languages neither of them understood; but that isn't how it works at all. He goes back to his little room on Eyre Square, and sits there, and every so often Jack Keegan appears, sometimes giving the impression of having people with him, sometimes not. When he has people with him they go out together into Galway and wander around, the people-impressions appearing to gasp at the clarity of the square; and then they wander out to where the new housing estates start that Kennedy never went into, and look at the blurred and increasingly blurred shapes stretching into the distance, and how the grey of the houses blur into the green and grey of the hills, and Keegan seems to emphasize just what a good start it is they've made. As far as Kennedy can tell.

"Are there any other candidates running?" he asks one evening.

"Maybe," Keegan says, sitting on the bed that Kennedy still sleeps in though he knows that he can do without sleep entirely if he felt like it. "You appreciate it's very hard to tell. Just, when enough people believe in you, it'll happen. It might happen for someone else first. I hope not. If I'm right, we need to get you elected as soon as possible, while you still have this place crystal clear in your memory."

"I'm doing well, though," Kennedy says, gesturing out the window. "Look at it. I mean, it's almost clearer than I ever saw it when I was alive."

"Yes," Keegan says. "Yes, you're doing really well. You're being really impressive. I mean, we've as good as got you elected eventually; we just haven't as good as got you elected soon." But there is a slight hesitancy about him which puzzles Kennedy. Maybe he's just tired, Kennedy tries to reassure himself; but an inconvenient nagging part of his mind reminds him that people don't get tired. Not here.

The turning point, in so far as there is one, comes one morning. Keegan and some people arrive, and for a change the people are well-defined, not blurry, wearing old but well-kept working clothes, obviously quite proud and even awed to be in his presence. No-one has yet asked him about the assassination; but, he supposes, everyone here has known for 29 years that he didn't die when the people on Earth thought he did. They go out, muttering self-consciously about nothing in particular. Kennedy prides himself that he's worked out already that this is different from a normal election; the aim is not to prove yourself one of the people, not to be witty or chummy or even approachable, but just to be. To be solid and reassuring and well-defined. So he will touch people's shoulders to attract their attention, to let them know just how solid even a light brush from his fingers can be, to watch the surprise and delight in their eyes when they work out what's touched them.

This day, they walk out along the main Dublin road as they have done so often before, to where the outlines become ill-defined. But this time, as they stare out at the housing estates that Kennedy saw so



infrequently that he wasn't even sure how far away they started, he notices that one of the houses is sharp and clear. As he stares at it, concentrating hard, trying to be absolutely sure that he isn't imagining things, the two houses on either side of it gradually solidify. And now there are three perfectly clear and distinct houses there, which gradually fade off into the grey-green blur on either side. For a moment the group looks at them in silence; then, so fast that it can hardly be seen moving, a boundary shoots out from the bases of the three houses, a sharp dividing line separating the green from the grey, firming up the colours of both. Below the boundary, the green is textured and grass. Above, the grey is reluctantly separating itself into houses; but not so much houses as house-concepts, those kind of houses you see in dreams which you know are houses and which always represent the same house when you see them but never actually look the same twice. And there is the housing estate, and the RTC, and the hotel, and the brow of the hill beyond them, and Kennedy, delighted and baffled, stands there watching them, feeling somehow exhausted, as after a great effort, but at the same time invigorated.

One of the women who's come that day turns to him, and he can see her face properly for the first time, every line on it clear and distinct and sharp. She is so joyful she is almost crying, and in her emotion she looks almost like Jackie to him. "That's my house," she says. "I lived there. That's my house. Oh, thank you. Thank you." Embarrassed, almost, by her happiness, Kennedy stares across to where the houses around hers are gradually becoming more and more definite. Keegan appears utterly unfazed by the whole thing, looking at the houses with a broad grin on his face and occasionally throwing I-told-you-so kind of looks at Kennedy. Kennedy looks back at the woman. There is nothing to say, so he has to say something. "Isn't it wonderful?" he says, throwing his arms wide to take in the whole scene. And, though nobody says anything, he can feel their agreement and their belief coursing through him like blood.

From that day on, he feels different. There is less of a sceptical feel to the people who come to visit him. They are still questioning, but there's an air of supplication and belief to it where previously there had been desperation and hope against hope. There is no boundary, no day on which he is sure of success where on the previous day he'd been uncertain, but there is a growing certainty. And the population of Galway visibly increases around him, and the life of Galway visibly increases around him. There is new building work going on across the square from him. He can go out to the west of the town to walk in the hills that he's never walked in, and they are solid and good. All the time he can feel himself being looked to by other people for their succour, and it makes him feel strong. It reinvigorates him, where even when he was alive he'd found it tiring occasionally.

One day, he realizes that he's known for a long time that the election is over and he's won. He goes out into the square, revels in the sunlight, and then, risking it for the first time, he closes his eyes and opens them in Dublin. He's visited Dublin three times in his time in Galway, but now it lies

around him, crystal clear, the only shifting and ill-defined thing the rocks at the bottom of the beautiful clear Liffey.

He closes his eyes again, and opens them in Washington, and Lyndon Johnson is there congratulating him (never thought he'd make it to Heaven, he thinks absently), and Abraham Lincoln is there congratulating him. The Capitol dome softly reflects the sun. The railings around the White House are down, and children are picnicking on the grass, as it should be and should have been. And then, screwing up his courage

— He closes his eyes again and opens them in Dealey Plaza, standing next to the wooden fence on a grassy knoll. No traffic is going through the square. But he still feels a stab of fear at his heart, an emotion he hasn't felt for — how long now? We'll do without that, he thinks, and nods towards the Book Depository; and it is gone, and where it was is a green patch of grass.

And, standing in the middle of the grass, a silhouetted figure. I didn't put that there, he thinks, and a stab of fear hits him again. What is it?

He walks down the knoll, cautiously approaches the figure. It's pitch black, as if permanently in shadow. It's obviously solid, but it gives the impression of not being entirely there. Its outline cuts crisply across the grass behind it like a hole. Kennedy didn't put it there. It's an affront against nature, and an affront against his authority. Ten feet from it, he stops, suddenly not sure what to do, suddenly frightened.

Then someone, somewhere, switches on the light inside the figure, and the blackness rounds itself out, acquires contours and colour, and Kennedy's heart stops for a beat. It's Oswald, poor deranged Oswald, the light of madness lighting up his eyes, the rifle clutched in his right hand, the shadows on his head ludicrously stretching away at a different angle from the shadows on his body.

"Lee," Kennedy says. "Lee."

Slowly, almost inhumanly slowly, Oswald's eyes focus on Kennedy. His head turns with a mechanical smoothness. This is not Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy thinks. And it does not belong here, whatever it is. It does not belong here. He looks again at Oswald, the crisp black outline that still surrounds him, the bitter expression on his face. This is wrong. This is wrong, in a world where I have made everything right, he thinks. I don't know what to do.

Oswald, now clearly looking at Kennedy, makes no further move. His face doesn't soften. He appears not even to be breathing. His hand firmly grasps the rifle, but makes no attempt to move it. Although his expression remains fixed, Kennedy suddenly sees through the bitterness in it to the accusation below.

"Lee," he says again. Oswald doesn't react in any way. Kennedy stares back at him. "Lee, I forgive you for what you tried to do to me."

Oswald stares back for a moment, then explodes into life. Kennedy blinks, and there Oswald is, now nine feet tall, still outlined in black, the sun directly behind him casting his shadow over Kennedy. The heat of his anger begins to scorch the grass below him. "You fuck," he says, and takes one step forward and aims his fist at Kennedy.

The blow comes so fast that Kennedy doesn't know how to react; all he knows is that he now finds him-



self ten feet away from Oswald again, standing, not physically hurt at all but feeling a panic rise within him. I don't know what to do here, he thinks, and then he sees that Oswald's fist is bloodstained, and it leaps to full prominence in his view; it's as if it's right there in front of him, three feet long, dripping blood and flesh, and now he feels as though his ribs have broken, and now he's twenty, thirty feet away again and whole again. And Oswald turns to him, his teeth bared, his pointed flesh-tearing carnivore's teeth, and Kennedy closes his eyes and is in Galway.

**H**e sits in Eyre Square, staring at the sun and the new buildings. People flow round him, looking for his support; but he finds himself unable to give it. He's deeply shocked and uncertain, and he's retreated into himself, and he can't feel the presence of the others as he has before. He sits there, feeling the people ebbing away from him, feeling the collapse of their belief, feeling it spread away from him throughout everyone who has trusted him; and eventually all there is to feel is cold and lonely. So he sits in the square, feeling cold and lonely, and at about five that afternoon a crack opens in the sky in front of him and Oswald's giant hands, poking through, grab at its edges and tear it open until it's large enough for Oswald to step through.

"Lee," Kennedy says.

"You fuck," Oswald says, towering over him. "You fuck. You don't change."

"I do!" Kennedy says. "I have!"

"You don't know what you're doing," Oswald says. "Are you here to remember the real world for people? What a pathetic thing to do in Heaven. Sit around all day reliving your past life. You pandering fuck. And you don't even get that right. What's this new building doing here?" He gestures behind him. "What's the cinema in the centre of town?"

"There was always —"

"No there wasn't. You're pathetic. You ran America deluding the country that you were different. You even fooled me for a bit. You fooled America that you were dead. Now you are, and you still can't stop trying to fool people. You can't help it. You pathetic fuck. There's no helping you." He raises the rifle, then lowers it slightly. Kennedy stares down its barrel. "Every woman looks like Jackie, don't they? Or —" Oswald's voice takes on a nasty, sarcastic tone "— Marilyn. Things look clearer than they ever did when you were alive, don't they? That's because you're making it all up. You don't know anything but you can't admit it to yourself, so you make it up. You fuck. You deserved this long ago." And this time, when he raises the rifle, he fires, and suddenly Kennedy sits on the seat with his midriff peppered with shot and his spine broken, unable to move and unable to die. "I got you eventually, you bastard," Oswald says. "I got you eventually."

This isn't right! Kennedy thinks stupidly as the agony shoots through him. This isn't right! I've saved the world! I've become God! This can't be happening! But he can already feel the people slipping away from him, can see, with a paradoxical clarity, the hills becoming blurred and blending with the sky. And now he can recognize the new building on the square as the Book Depository, towering over everything





"Yes, you got me there," Kennedy says. "Still egotistical Jack Kennedy, that's me." The first shot rings out behind them. "You beat me. You beat me."

"But," Kennedy says. All his life he's been a man of action, a man of decision, a man who sees through a problem to a solution instantly. Up to now. Now he's in mid-thought when the bullet hits, no decision yet made, and for a brief instant everything is pain-coloured.

**William Whyte** was born in Belfast in 1968, and later studied theoretical physics at Trinity College, Dublin. He now lives in Oxford, where he is “currently sitting on a novel which is in the middle of revisions which it may well not find its way out of again.” The above is his first published short story, and he adds: “I’ve never actually lived in Galway, but it’s probably my favourite place in the world.”



# Alan E. Nourse

## An Annotated Bibliography

### Graham Andrews

One of science fiction's underrated authors, Alan E. Nourse died of heart failure on 19th July 1992, at his home near Thorp, Washington State. F.M. Busby (with Charles N. Brown) wrote an obituary of Nourse for *Locus* (September 1992), and Avram Davidson contributed a heartfelt Appreciation.

Alan E(dward) Nourse – pronounced “nurse” – was born on 11th August 1928 in Des Moines, Iowa. Between 1946 and 1948, he served as a Hospitalman Third Class in the U.S. Navy. He received his B.A. (in biological science) from Rutgers University in 1951 and took his medical degree (1955) at the University of Pennsylvania.

Nourse wrote his way through medical school, beginning with “High Threshold” (*Astounding Science-Fiction*, March 1951). *Trouble on Titan* was published by Winston in 1954, as one of their “Adventures in Science Fiction” juvenile novels. A British edition followed in 1956, from Hutchinson, and the book has since been translated into German, Italian and Japanese.

Like many another American sf author (Philip K. Dick, A.E. van Vogt – even Daniel F. Galouye), Nourse was much more highly-thought-of abroad than in the USA. Probably because he wrote “... what is generally referred to as juvenile fiction. This categorization is caused by the fact that his protagonists are usually young people, and by no means indicates that adults can't enjoy his work.”

The above quotation has been timely ripped from *A Reader's Guide to Science Fiction* by Baird Searles, Martin Last, Beth Meacham and Michael Franklin (Avon, 1979). It's a bit damning-with-faint-praise. However, the ostensibly “juvenile” novels that Nourse wrote for McKay stand favourable (at least) comparison with any of the Heinlein/Scribner volumes.

Nourse hadn't written a science-fiction novel for nearly ten years, but he'd been hard at work on non-fiction books like *The Elk Hunt* (1986), *Radio Astronomy* (1990) and *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (1992). He also produced several Awful Warnings for children, e.g. *Herpes* (1985), *AIDS* (1986; revised edition, 1989), and *Teens Guide to AIDS Prevention* (1990). Plus a monthly medical-advice column for *Good Housekeeping*.

All told, Nourse wrote 39 volumes of (mostly medical) non-fiction. Astronomy was his “second string”: *Nine Planets* (Harper, 1960; revised edition, 1970) is a guided tour of the Solar System that can still put Patrick Moore to shame. He deployed his professional

expertise in two mainstream novels: *Junior Intern* (1955) and *The Practice* (1978).

But Nourse will be more fondly remembered for his 11 science-fiction novels and 50-odd shorter works. He favoured the well-knit plot, laced with swift action, and told in a plain style. Not surprisingly, most of his stories have a medical slant; somewhere between the hearty melodramatics of “Med Service” (Murray Leinster) and the detailed exobiology of “Sector General” (James White).

#### **Trouble on Titan** (Winston, 1954)

: Above-average first novel; well-above-average juvenile. “Tuck Benedict was a raw and unofficial recruit to the Security Commission... who guarded the peace of the Solar System. But chance gave him the seemingly impossible task of preventing an armed uprising on Titan – the Saturnian moon that was small in size but absolutely vital to the preservation of Earth's civilization” (from blurb to Lancer edition, 1967).

#### **A Man Obsessed** (Ace, 1955; doubled with *The Last Planet*, by Andre Norton); expanded as *The Mercy Men* (McKay, 1968)

Nourse's first “adult” novel. Jeff Meyer's hunt for the man who killed his father leads him inside the Hoffman Medical Center, where he must apply to be a Mercy Man. “The Mercy Men are medical mercenaries... desperate, derelict human beings who have sold their brains to science in the hope that if they survive with some degree of sanity, they can return to the normal world with a fortune” (Kirkus Reviews).

#### **Rocket to Limbo** (McKay, 1957)

Novel; magazine version: *Satellite*, October 1957. “WOLF IV – THE PLANET FROM WHICH NO SHIP EVER RETURNED!... Lars Heldrigsson was fresh out of the Colonial Service Academy and his first assignment was a milk-run to Vega aboard the *Ganymede*. Not a very exciting trip, except that the ship's commander, Walter Fox, had explored and opened up more colony-worlds than any other man alive!” (from blurb to Ace edition, 1959). A juvenile (surprise! surprise!).

#### **The Invaders Are Coming!** with J.A. Meyer (Ace, 1959)

Novel; magazine version: *Amazing Stories*, May 1958 (as “The Sign of the Tiger”). J.A. Meyer?... “For a century America had been a securely isolated power without crisis, turmoil – or progress. Then... super-security measures were shattered by the theft of



fissionable material from an atomic power plant. When it leaked out that the thieves had been invaders from outer space – alien monsters – chaos reigned” (blurb). Eat your heart out, Eric Frank Russell! Well, maybe not.

### **Scavengers in Space** (McKay, 1959)

Novel; magazine version: *Amazing Stories*, September 1959 (as “Gold in the Sky”). “Deals with the quest of the Hunter brothers for a mysterious bonanza located somewhere in the asteroid belt. The dangers and details of asteroid mining are carefully outlined, and the bonanza itself proves to be an open gate to a wider future in the stars” (Cleveland Press). The technical background is fully equal to that given in Poul Anderson’s *Tales of the Flying Mountains* (1970).

### **Star Surgeon** (McKay, 1960)

Novel; magazine version: *Amazing Stories*, December 1959. Dal Timgar, from the planet Garvia, is the first off-worlder to qualify as a doctor on protectionist Hospital Earth. “But can an alien really practice medicine as well as a human? And will the humans let him?” (from blurb to Ace edition, 1986). A laudable attack on bigotry, unfairly neglected. Not to be confused with the James White *Star Surgeon* (Ballantine, 1963).

### **Tiger by the Tail** (McKay, 1961); UK title: *Beyond Infinity* (Dobson, 1962)

Nourse’s first collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked \*): “Tiger by the Tail”; “Nightmare Brother”\*; “Problem”; “The Coffin Cure”\*; “Brightside Crossing”\*; “The Native Soil”; “Love Thy Vimp”\*; “Letter of the Law”; “Family Resemblance”\*.

### **Raiders From the Rings** (McKay, 1962)

Novel. “The underground people of Earth...had sent a mighty armada into space, rushing in lethal orbit towards Mars. The Spacers – still really Earthmen themselves – were poised for the counter-blow...Now Ben Trefon understood that in the Black Belt of Power bequeathed to him by his father rested the final hope of the human race!” (from blurb to Pyramid edition, 1963). A delinquent juvenile.

### **The Counterfeit Man** (McKay, 1963)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked \*): “The Counterfeit Man”\*; “The Canvas Bag”; “An Ounce of Cure”\*; “The Dark Door”; “Meeting of the Board”; “Circus”; “My Friend Bobby”\*; “The Link”; “Image of the Gods”; “The Expert Touch”\*; “Second Sight.”

### **The Universe Between** (McKay, 1965)

Fix-up novel. Expanded from “High Threshold” (*Astounding*, March 1951) and “The Universe Between” (*Astounding*, September 1951). “To save Earth, Bob Benedict must venture once more into the invisible dangerous world of the Thresholders. If he fails to return – sane – Earth, and all those who inhabit the planet, will be hurled into oblivion” (from blurb to Paperback Library edition, 1967).

### **Psi High and Others** (McKay, 1967)

Fix-up novel. Prologue & Epilogue plus: Part 1,

“The Martyr” (*Fantastic Universe*, January 1957); Part 2, “Psi High” (original); Part 3, “Mirror, Mirror” (*Fantastic*, June 1960). “While the Watchers from the Galactic Federation await the verdict – freedom or quarantine for Earth – they review man’s reactions to three past crises...Intelligent postulates; skilful story-telling which challenges, entertains (Kirkus Reviews).

### **Rx for Tomorrow** (McKay, 1971)

Collection. Contents (outstanding stories marked \*): “Symptomaticus Medicus”; “Rx”; “Contamination Crew”\*; “In Sheep’s Clothing”\*; “A Gift for Numbers”; “Free Agent”\*; “The Last House Call”\*; “Grand Rounds”; “Bramble Bush”; “Heir Apparent”; “Plague!”\*

### **The Bladerunner** (McKay, 1971)

Nourse’s best novel, now eclipsed by Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) – the film version of Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Rights to the title only were sold “in perpetuity throughout the universe.” Curiously, William S. Burroughs had already adapted Nourse’s novel as the booklet *Bladerunner (A Movie)* in 1979. “Billy Gimp was a bladerunner...one of the shadowy procurers of illegal medical supplies for the nightmare world of the medical black market. Doc was a skilled surgeon at a government-operated hospital by day...and an underground physician by night, providing health care for the multitudes who could not – or would not – qualify for legal medical assistance” (from blurb to Ballantine edition, 1975).

### **The Fourth Horseman** (Harper & Row, 1983)

...of the Apocalypse. Novel. “Wilderness Patrol Officer Pamela Tate, scouting in the mountains of Washington (State), sees and touches a ground squirrel in the dusty path, blood trickling from its mouth. Forty-eight hours later she lies dead at her campsite, covered in mysterious welts and bruises...A killer is loose...Yersinia Pestis. Plague” (from blurb to Pinnacle edition, 1985).

Uncollected stories by Nourse include “Marley’s Chain” (*If*, September 1952), “Sixty-Year Extension” (*Planet Stories*, May 1954), and “The Compleat Consumers” (*F & SF*, April 1964). Nourse was working on several stories before he died, so the bibliography is (I hope) not yet concluded. And some publisher should bring out a commemorative *Best of...* anthology.

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Earlier annotated bibliographies in this occasional series were devoted to:

**C.J. Cherryh** (issue 55); **Barry N. Malzberg** (issue 61); **R.A. Lafferty** (issue 64); **Bob Shaw** (issue 67); and **Barrington J. Bayley** (issue 71).



So here I am sitting at the screen in springtime, thinking it won't be that bad, thinking just another book, thinking do it, just do it. But, like Robbie the Robot, like a very small man in a very hot robot costume going snap crackle pop, I cannot unlock the jaw, cannot fire the pen. I am blank. It is as though *The Gripping Hand* (Pocket Books, \$22) by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, a novel which has since been published in the UK as *The Moat Around Murcheson's Eye* (HarperCollins, £14.99), comes with a virus whose function is to ensure that reading the book wipes the reader. And now that I have managed to finish *The Gripping Hand*, I sit at the screen for a year and a day in springtime, and am perfectly blank, and only slowly, as the wind blows the sand off the welts, do a few memories of the experience, like stigmata, begin to tickle the inner eye. Mein Führer I can talk.

It might be a good idea to begin with the strange small puzzle of the alternate titles. Over the two decades they took to gestate this sequel to *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974), it appears that Niven and Pournelle consistently referred to the draft manuscript as "The Moat Around Murcheson's Eye," and that it was only in the months before publication that someone in the States actually read the book and decided, low-life pun-avoidance aside, that there was a pretty good reason to go with a title like *The Gripping Hand*, or with almost anything else that might be seen as in some sense relevant to the text. Readers of the first book will remember that the main problem at its conclusion is how to restrain the highly inventive, highly technologized Moties – an alien race also characterized (1) by its division into a variety of specialized forms, (2) by its inability to control its own breeding, and (3) by having three hands, the third para-binary-logic one being the hand that grips – from escaping the home Mote System and infesting the galaxy. But the only way to leave the Mote System is by instantaneous starship travel between "points" – doubletalk lesions in space-time which pop in and out of existence whenever a newly created star rejigs the configurations of the blah-blah of the whatsit, or a plot needs gingering – and the only point-to-point connection theoretically available to the Moties leads directly to Murcheson's Eye, which the human Empire has blockaded, with what might be called a Moat, which keeps the aliens penned in.

*The Gripping Hand* begins about two decades after the blockage has begun, and we are soon assured – *en passant*, because the first hundred pages of the novel have nothing to do with the main story – that the Moat has held perfectly well over that period.

But we soon learn that that time of security – and any relevance the working title might have had at some early-draft stage – has passed, because it turns out that a new star is aborning nearby, and when it comes into existence (which it soon does) it will immediately create a new point-to-point for the Moties to take advantage of. Simultaneously, it turns out that human biologists – somewhere Brian Stableford has remarked on how extraordinarily convenient it was for Niven/Pournelle that none of the numerous Motie castes specializes in genetic engineering – have worked out a way of controlling the Motie sex changes which trigger the breed-or-die imperative which has so frightened the increasingly sclerotic Empire, which is actually run by an Emperor and an aristocracy-by-birth composed mostly of ass-tight WASP males and their icy spouses and their utterly appalling children, all of whom occasionally indulge in moments of tweedy sauce but all of whom exude, when it's called for, the profoundly spartan charisma natural to any 20-year-old scion called from his yacht (this does actually happen) to defend an unearned income. And *all* of them know the true secret of being rich: that it allows you to use the time of others.

But stop, stop right here. We begin to drift. We begin to feel *mind-wiped*. We must not talk about how Niven/Pournelle envision the future course of the human race, the desert sanctities of hierarchy, the Constable Plod ass-backward stiffnecks who embody the military ethos, but stop. Back to the story. The moat around Murcheson's Eye is irrelevant to the current book – and is hardly therefore mentioned or visited within it – because the Moties are about to dodge around it. But the threat of unfettered Motie breeding is *also* a thing of the past. So. There is no Moat and no need for one. There is, in other words, no story.

What does happen, happens in vast dithers all over the map, and the two schematic charts of the *mise en scène* which appear in the American edition endpapers are – given Niven and Pournelle's oldest-member habit of telling what tale they have to tell out of the side of each other's mouths – absolutely essential for any reader who wants to understand the physical

relationship between (say) Vermin City, Mote Prime, New Crazy Eddie Point, Mote Gamma, the Curdle, Leading Gamma Trojans "Byzantium," Murcheson's Eye, New Caledonia System, et cetera. The last half of the book consists almost entirely of a sequence of jigsawing military actions in which these and other locations are visited or fought over or dodged, almost certainly because there is nothing left for Tweedledum and Tweedledee to do with *The Gripping Hand* but agree to have a battle – given the fact that all the issues it deals with were solved off-stage long before any of us got a look in.

Mixed up in these military actions, it is possible to trace the tale of the coming-of-age of one brave aristocratic lass who finds a hubby while simultaneously conveying to various Motie factions news of the sex-and-birth-control breakthrough, just in time to stop a galactic war. This may all be truly and deeply silly – it's rather as though one were to picture Princess Di conveying the only proof of a cure for AIDS, on foot, through the Sahara, into the heart of war-torn central Africa, arriving just in time to resolve a dozen genocidal tribal conflicts, betroth Quatermain and save the planet – but there are some kinetic pleasures in the jigsaws of the trip, pleasures unfortunately rather muted for UK readers, as the edition available to them manages not only to retain the irrelevant working title but also drops the maps. The endpapers are blank. The tale is indecipherable. This seems less than sedulous.

But even the US edition fails to prevent mind-wipe, the kind of feeling one guesses Ronald Reagan's executive staff may have experienced after he told them two bumblebees in beanies had just sold him SDI. But maybe this isn't entirely fair. It may not be entirely to its authors' discredit that *The Gripping Hand* seems palsied with inattention, that it grips upon nothing but the detritus of a tale already told. It may be the case that Niven and Pournelle put off completing the book because – being cognitive guys – they had already argued themselves through the other side of any pretext that there was a genuine novel to write, that – as far as making anything of this particular sequel went – they had lost their grip. In which case, the publication of the book is a confession. And each reader is its priest.

# Terminal Rocks

## John Clute



After the airlessness of the empty church, reading **High Steel** (Tor, \$18.95) by Jack C. Haldeman II and Jack Dann was like breathing pure oxygen. The first quarter of the book was originally published as *Echoes of Thunder* (1991) by the same publisher, a circumstance not recorded in the proof copy of the full text, though undoubtedly a full reckoning will be provided readers of the final version. This initial text, which better fits the title *High Steel* than the full book does, carries its 22nd-century American Indian protagonist from his dwindling reservation into forced labour for an autonomous corporation in Earth orbit, where he works the high steel, building a new research habitat. But John Stranger is no ordinary Indian labourer. He is – loosely – an apprentice shaman; he has a superhuman capacity to locate himself in shifting matrices; and the corporation which owns him wishes – though Leighton, its ultimate boss, does not really know how – to exploit him. At the end of the novella, Stranger has saved his reservation from orbital destruction, and is poised to ascend labyrinths of revelation. *Echoes of Thunder*, in other words, ends in a slingshot; and one might well worry about the capacity of any continuation to sustain the pace and lift.

In the event, there is nothing to worry about. *High Steel* may not be much devoted to the exploration of original ideas, and reads at times like an echo chamber in which current sf turns and tropes are sampled and transformed; but in everything it attempts to accomplish it is a remarkable success. What makes the book so intriguing, I think, is its authors' concentration on narrative. A musical analogy comes to view. Where Niven/Pournelle – like Ludwig Spohr – belches the past out as a repeating and terminal gas, Haldeman/Dann – like maybe Arnold Schoenberg in one of his later and more forgiving scores, though lacking of course his transformative originality – subjects the past to an intensive and non-reiterative scrutiny. In *High Steel*, as in Schoenberg, nothing is said more than once.

The high steel routines themselves, once we're beyond the end of the novella, slip immediately into retrospect. Leighton, first perceived as a tinfoil ogre, becomes a Dickian tormented magus caught in the coils of a savage family romance. Various imagined futures – from hard sf through Cyberpunk – intersect en passant in narrative sequences of astonishing equipoise and thrust. There are echoes, once in a while, from outside sf: Louise Erdrich arguably supplies a bit of the South Dakota Indian episteme. But most of the book is a predator, like a cat with blazing eyes, gorging on the good meat of

genre: Dick, William Gibson, Greg Bear (for transcendental Alshamanism shticks here very succinctly conveyed), Joe Haldeman, many others. There are aliens, and Jupiter, and FTL, and Einstein the AI god, and ghost dances, and marrying out, and New England School of Ethical Romance sehnsucht à la Richard Grant and Co, and a kitchen sink. And it spins high and dry and off the end of the last word. It is most highly recommended.

It has been the misfortune of this reviewer to see the worst of Tom Holt while remembering, as through a knotted scrim, the best; but luck turns. **Here Comes the Sun** (Orbit, £14.99), after several novels which read against the grain of the man's real drift, like fingernails down a blackboard, presents Tom Holt out of the closet, Tom Holt the bracing surreal misanthropist whose vision of things is as bleak as Douglas Adams's, and at times as funny.

The first sign of new life in the current book is the activity of the language: jokes; turns of phrases which speed on after doing their job and don't sit preening; several examples of the sort of martian imagery that makes you see things fresh (the heroine stares at her blank VDU, which is "staring back at her with a sort of blank look, as if it had been sniffing glue"); the occasional genuine metaphor. The entire book, in fact, reads like a figures of speech gone haywire, taking off in a dozen directions from the essential premise being that the universe is operated like British Rail, by a staff which, though supernatural, has been attenuated by cuts and thatcherite entropy. It is not a very reasonable premise to run a novel on, and Holt makes no attempt to reassure his readers that his tale is meant to cohere in any cod-naturalistic manner. It is as though he had not only bitten the bullet of the inherent absurdity of the world and the tale that winds it up, but had learned how to utter that sense of absurdity in the light of day.

*Here Comes the Sun* is, in fact, quite remarkably remorseless; and its concluding passages give off a sense of deep and profound cynicism; as the novel ends, the typical Holt heroine – a nurse-like prig with laddered stockings and a Doris Day glare and nary a thought of sex in the chill of her 1950s skull – sorts the universe into an infinity of Milton Keynes, and rests. This is theodicy as horrorshow. This is comedy with a very wide grin.

In the vast whang-bang avalanche of the telling of Ian M. Banks's newest sf novel, a small clear voice can be heard, now and then, through the clatter of whinging-it. It is a voice of utter melancholy, and what it says speaks

the truth of **Against a Dark Background** (Orbit, £15.99), a truth also hinted at in the demolition derby shenanigans which occupy the hundreds of pages – quite a few of them, it must be said, otiose – of the surface tale. We are not, this time, in anything like the Culture universe. The Golterian solar system – as it's pretty complicated, a map might have been very useful – exists in terrifying isolation from the rest of the galaxy; and although Banks does seem to imply that it is occupied by human stock, and does give (conflicting) evidence that civilization on Golter has existed for only ten thousand (or is it thirty thousand?) years, there is no sense anywhere of a shared past. If there is a Culture, it is impossibly far away. Golter and its stock are ten thousand light years from home; and neither are doing well. The planet, and its mates in the system, are seamed by millennia of use; and humanity, after testing to destruction, time and again, every possible regimen of governance, seems just as deeply and profoundly soiled by over-use as its battered habitats.

The story that slams through the surface of the book is a hunt-the-searcher caper tale, and for a hundred pages or so seems destined to cash out in the usual way: to save her life and to run down a couple of artefacts, the heroine is forced to reassemble the combat team with which she had years before been virally linked into a highly efficient symbiotic fighting machine; once reunited, the team performs an initial caper; travels around the solar system while dodging the fanatical Huhz who have taken out a Hunting Passport on the heroine because the continued existence of her family (they think) blocks the appearance of the Messiah as the decamillennium approaches; searches for and eventually finds the Lazy Gun which speaks inside the heroine's head enticing words about the end of the universe; and the book ends.

But that is not, of course, the real story. To begin with, all the capers go wrong. The dirty-dozen "synchro-neurobondees," despite the viral symbiosis which is supposed to make them work as one, bungle every action in which they become involved. The Lazy Gun itself, and the other weapons and artefacts the team runs across in almost 500 pages of head-banging rataplan, are all MacGuffins. Every action taken on the surface of the book leads to dust and derision; ends in futile pain, or apathy, or death. The heroine – this is a plot-turn which is very broadly signalled from the beginning of the book – has been betrayed from the first by the family member who seems most eager to help her. His reasons for this course of action – and the flashback sequences which illustrate the family-romance etiology of



his treachery – are reminiscent of the revelations at the core of *Use of Weapons* (1990), which remains Banks's best single sf book. The heroine's companions go through hell. The world declines. On the last page of all – it is the only time she gives off a Munchkin Persson whiff – she accelerates away from us on a monowheel, after armageddon-like scenes, across salt flats, into limbo.

If the story were not clear enough – if it weren't already clear that *Against a Dark Background* is intended to pilot itself into terminal rocks, and that the title itself reflects the lack of any star in the sky, literal or figurative – then there are, as I said earlier, a few moments of repose, where the same message sidles into the heart, more deeply it may be. The central image of the book is perhaps that of the merry-go-round which dominates a huge room in the family mansion during the early childhood of the heroine – her name is Sharrow, and unusually for Banks her name can be pronounced. One of Sharrow's central memories – it is returned to more than once – is of riding the merry-go-round on a life-sized model of a "fierce-looking extinct flightless bird nearly three metres high with a serrated bill and huge claw-feet."

Sometimes she fell asleep on the fabulous bird, and travelled for a long time through the warm air of the ballroom, between the enormous mirrors on one wall and the closed curtains of the windows facing them on the other.

She preferred the curtains closed because it was winter and outside lay the snow, blank and cold and soft.

It is the only solace offered anywhere in any page of the book. *Against a Dark Background* has mirrors galore, most of them shattered. But in the end, the noise is naked. There is no curtain from the blank.

(John Clute)

## God Games

### Paul J. McAuley

**P**aul Park's *The Cult of Loving Kindness* (Grafton, £4.99) brings to an end *The Starbridge Chronicles*, the most wonderfully strange sf trilogy of the late '80s. There is a hint of *roman-fleuve* in that title, and *Chronicles* is indeed powered along by a sweeping narrative and an abiding sense of destiny. It is set on a world somewhere near the edge of the Galaxy but called Earth, on which seasons last 20,000 days. All of history, all of society, is dominated by this great slow turning. We are reminded at once of Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia*, but Park uses Eastern rather than Western traditions to

underpin his narrative. The wheel is not Vico's cycle of history, but the wheel of Karma. Hell is not forever, but merely one of the nine other planets of the system, through which all but the chosen few must pass in a cycle of rebirth before reaching Paradise; and Paradise is an eccentric moon which at one time or another passes close to all of the planets.

Science fiction is rife with borrowed exoticism, in which the trappings of some non-Western culture are filched to furnish an alien world. Park clearly derives much material from first-hand experience of India and the Far East, but it is made rich and strange by his inventive use of estrangement and ambiguity, an unsettling mix of the alien and the commonplace, and crafty blending of technology and religion. Things may or may not be what they seem: sugar rain, for instance, turns out to be a kind of gasoline which can transform fetuses into monsters; there are butane lighters and cigarettes (which may be either actual butane lighters and cigarettes, or their functional equivalents), but also poisonous slugs and parasitic butterflies; the surface temperature of a particular hell is not recorded in a sacred text but can be measured using telescope and thermocouple. More than this, Park's narrative is informed with a dark human comedy of a kind rare in sf, and he writes like a recording angel. In a few paragraphs, he can conjure a whole city or a century of history with a verve that takes the breath away.

The first two books, *Soldiers of Paradise* and *Sugar Rain*, recorded the arrival of spring in the year 00016, and its effect on the city state of Charn – in particular, the revolutionary overthrow of the Starbridges, who ruled by tyrannical application of caste-system and religion to ensure survival of their peoples through the long winter. Now it is just past midsummer, and religion is returning in the form of the Cult of Loving Kindness, which has its muddled roots in the martyrdom of Mad Prince Abu Starbridge, a character from the first two books. An antimonial (the peaceful, pedantic antimonials may be the natives of this world, and the humans settlers, or perhaps vice versa: like much else, it is up to the reader to decide) customs officer returns to his native village, and on the way is given newborn human twins, brother and sister, to care for. They are raised wild and strange by the antimonials, and by the time they reach adolescence civilization is encroaching on the village, as more and more land is being turned to agricultural use in a frantic dash to fill the granaries for winter. Brother and sister become entangled in the Cult of Loving Kindness, and willingly or not take on the mythic qualities of the murdered last bishop of Charn and her

antimonial lover: a reenactment of this tragedy is needed to cement the power of the Cult.

*The Cult of Loving Kindness* is of a smaller scale than its predecessors, yet within its intimate compass Park pays off all accrued debts: it is rife with echoes and reflections. The thread which runs through all three novels is that history will be, and individuals can do little to influence it. Fate, like the slow turning seasons, is inevitable, and only those characters which accept it achieve enlightenment. In a genre where history all too usually is transformed by heroes, Park's achievement, which is considerable, is to make this believable in one of the most gorgeous and consistent feats of worldbuilding ever seen in sf.

**I**n Orson Scott Card's series *Homecoming* (or rather, one of his series: there are so many I'm beginning to lose track of them, and expect a final volume called something like *The Xenocidal Homecoming of Prentice Alvin*), history is also determinant, but specifically so, for it is God Who is calling the shots. We have been delivered, like Moses on the mountain, of the second volume, *The Call of Earth* (Legend, £8.99), in which the narrative threads of the first are plucked from midair and expertly manipulated towards closure.

God is a computer, the Oversoul. He has been orbiting the colony world Harmony for forty million years, keeping the peace by stopping people thinking about military technology, and is beginning to fret that He may be wearing out. Hoping to petition for renewal by Earth's Keeper, He has been manipulating one family to set up an expedition to return to Earth.

Families are a big deal in Scott Card novels, and he is an expert in delineating their social dynamics, their unthinking loyalties and petty jealousies. Loyalty in particular, for the motivation of almost every character, when put to the test, devolves to an almost Victorian fanaticism when it comes to duty, an easy but not entirely convincing way to manipulate characters (there's not one character here that isn't manipulated to a greater or lesser degree, but far too many of them are manipulated in the same way). In the city of Basilica, families are more complex than most, since its society is matriarchal, and women have children by temporary contract with more than one husband. More was made of this in the first book, for here the women are locked in their houses (because of their power, rather than because of lack of it, but it amounts to the same thing) and it is men who make most of the running. The novel turns on the visions of the God-blessed family, which may or may not have been engendered by the Keeper of Earth, and their struggles



against the invasion of Basilica by the charismatic General Vozmuzhalnoy. The general doesn't believe in God, but it soon becomes clear that he has been manipulated like the rest – and as the plot develops to its climax we discover that everything has been predetermined by the schemes of the Oversoul.

Card is one of sf's finest technicians of plot, and while he is prone to let his thumbmark show in the making, here the thumbmarks are disguised as God's. God is the author of history, actively interfering for His own ends. Indeed, there's a strong sense of the Old Testament running through the book: the Oversoul is a desert god, or at least that's where most of His revelations take place; the general's takeover of the city is steeped in the heroic cunning of a David; the Oversoul is trying to ensure that thirteen chosen couples escape into the desert (the Israelites had twelve tribes, but we remember that Card is a Mormon, and on their flight thirteen families were led to Utah's salt lakes). In the end, the Chosen leave Basilica, the narrative pulls back and history sweeps over all, leaving only the hook that the trek to Earth has begun in earnest, but we don't yet quite know what it will find. If you like Card's fiction enough to trust him, then that will be enough.

**S**torm Constantine's **Sign for the Sacred** (Headline, £8.99) has a cavalier disregard for organized religion, for all that it centres around the mystery of a charismatic prophet. There are four narrative threads, all leading towards the prophet Resenence Jeopardy, whose teachings are threatening the establishment Church of Ixmarity. The ruthless cleric Wilfish Implexion is determined to find and execute the heretic, while a pair of mis-matched couples are searching for him as a means of salvation. Interleaved with their picaresque journeys is the story of Jeopardy's one-time lover, a dancer escaped from slavery (and another of Constantine's beautiful doomed bisexual boys), revealing where Jeopardy started from, although not quite how he came to be what he is.

None of this really comes together: Constantine seems more concerned with individual set-pieces rather than plot development. But despite a slow beginning, a pell-mell ending that throws the entire plot out of the window, and occasionally wandering across the dividing line between artfulness and whimsy, there's plenty to enjoy here. Constantine has a painterly eye for the bizarre, and shows a lighter touch than she's previously displayed. There's a finely sustained (there's no getting away from this) romantically gothic late medieval atmosphere, and a nice ambiguity about Jeopardy himself, who when he finally appears isn't quite sure what he has become, and

nor are we, but that is perhaps the moral of this particular fairy tale.

**T**he consolations of religion were never for Isaac Asimov, even at the end. Although his last book, **Forward the Foundation** (Doubleday, £14.99), aches with a foreboding sense of mortality, it is resolutely humanist. It is of course the final part in Asimov's attempt to weave all his works into a single narrative, and returns to the beginning of the Foundation series, and the capital world of the Galactic Empire, and Hari Seldon. Cast in episodic form, it plays Seldon's attempts to set up his two foundations for the preservation of knowledge against the coming of night and the fall of the Empire.

It is a chronicle of loss – of Seldon's failing powers, of the end of order and rationality. In every episode, Seldon pits his own rationality against corrupt or foolish politicians and wins, but in every episode things are a little worse. Not once but twice, Seldon is hauled into court for defending himself against yobs. His best friend, a robot, must disappear to escape unmasking; his wife, another robot, dies; his stepson's family are killed in a military skirmish; a sympathetic emperor is assassinated. In the end Seldon has only the future, and when he dies, as we know he must, it is unfolding around him as he predicted, as we know it must. We have already read of the future of his foundations, in other books. And yet Seldon's future is the future of days long past. The present is so much stranger than Asimov or any of his generation could have imagined their future would be, back at the end of the last World War and the dawn of the Cold War and the atomic age. There are other futures now, and while they all owe something to Asimov's vast empire, it is fallen and there is no return.

#### Also Noted:

Alan Lightman's **Einstein's Dreams** (Bloomsbury, £11.99) is a series of short, sweet epiphanies structured as the dreams of the young Einstein who sleeps at his patent-office desk, exhausted by his labour at reconceiving time. Each dream is of an imaginary world where time behaves differently: where there is no future; where time brings increasing order; where time is absent and there are only images, and so on. These are not sterile thought experiments but are crammed with life, examining the consequences of changes in the nature of time not in terms of physics but in human terms, love and death, and the textures of everyday life of early-20th-century Zurich. In a world where time is present but not measurable:

*Some people attempt to quantify time, to parse time, to dissect time.*

*They are turned to stone. Their bodies stand frozen on street corners, cold, hard, and heavy. In time, these statues are taken to the quarryman, who cuts them up evenly in equal sections and sells them for houses when he needs the money.*

But Einstein's *Dreams*, beautifully and tenderly written, is no monument: every page is alive with the joy of speculation, and filled with human warmth.

Brian D'Amato's **Beauty** (£4.99) spends a long time going nowhere much with the notion that with a miraculous fleshlike polymer a gifted artist could create the ultimate Iconic Woman, but there's enjoyment to be had along the way from this bitchy and very funny insider's view of the dizzily hip late-20th-century New York art scene. It aims at literature, but despite salting its text with quotes from the likes of Bataille, it is surface with only apparent depth, self-regarding reflection without analysis. It is a mirror.

(Paul J. McAuley)

## Some Out-of-Genre Fantasies

### Chris Gilmore

**W**ith fantasy the distinction between genre and mainstream writing is complex, but it's not entirely misleading to say that the heirs of Dunsany, Cabell and Howard are in the laager, while the mainstream claims all other traditions. The distinction has nothing to do with intellectual content or literary merit; genealogy is all. The four non-genre books considered below reflect this diversity, but it's not without interest that two make use of the Unreliable Witness, three involve animals which are not all they seem, and three depend for a part of their impact on the topography of specific cities: Oxford, London and Uppsala. Far more importantly, two are about something, two exist only to show how clever are their authors.

**Snow**, by Nigel Frith (Breese Books, £14.99) concerns the involvement of Nigel O'Ryan (an Oxford undergraduate of romantic disposition who is very much the author's mouthpiece) with gothic manifestations emanating from an empty house on Boars Hill. To him they offer comfort, reassurance and love; to everyone else, horror and madness. By way of balance, the deconstructionist regime whereunder he must study Eng Lit at "St Mary's College" [Magdalen] is hardly less horrible and maddening, for he perceives himself as something midway between Rupert Brooke and Errol Flynn.



I sympathize, but would sympathize more if Frith could live up to the extremely high standards he demands of everyone else. You can't afford a *de haut en bas* tone when you scramble the order of a sentence like this.

He saw a staircase seemingly rearing up into the sky, down which with a pair of pistols, jerking her arms, staring, came a Victorian woman with a face death-pale, translucent and streaked with blood.

The burden of the allegory, which concerns the moral and intellectual deficiencies of the modern world in general, and English scholarship in particular, is essentially that of Ballard's "Studio 5, the Stars" (the ending is similar as well, though more sentimental in tone). Frith raises Ballard's ante by including 14 of Nigel's poems, but their quality is quite as erratic as his prose. There's a moderate sonnet, and rather a good villanelle, but when he tries to be funny we get such doggerel as:

Deep upon the dark horizon,

With their decagynous eyes on

Three shapes float with hurried craft

Born (sic) on a sail-entattered raft.

This is a serious weakness in one who describes himself as "a real poet," and I imagine his failure to discriminate between "sunk" and "sank" no less than "born" and "borne" must hamper him somewhat in his career as a university tutor.

There are also some loose ends; we never find out why O'Ryan hit the porter, for instance. Altogether, it's a pity that such an original ghost story should be marred by such gross unevenness of texture. If the general level of the writing could be raised to the very highest attained, we would have a worthy Oxonian counterpart to Simon Raven's *Places Where They Sing*, (though with proportions of sex and the supernatural reversed). But that's a very large if; Frith is obviously a man of strong passions, and such men need firm editorial direction. It has not been provided.

"Death is easy, comedy is hard"; by extension, gentle comedy is hardest of all. **The Jazz Elephants** by Paul Beardmore (Abacus, £6.99) achieves a sunny atmosphere throughout without descending to the mawkish, the pious or the twee. The two zoo elephants, Rumpus Pumpus and Finta Fanta, having learned to speak and read by studying keepers, visitors and old newspapers which blow into their compound, decide that the wider world beckons. They engineer their escape (leaving behind a locked-room mystery) and team up with Henri Coullisse, scion of a City family who wishes to be a jazz trombonist. In a Soho club the three of them join a combo which had been deficient in brass, the elephants trumpeting trad

and modern numbers to rare effect. But of course, all three have been missed...the (big) game's afoot!

Beardmore locates his tale perfectly in the topography of Soho and the City, and illustrates it with a glorious succession of fantasias on the themes provided by London's archetypes, starting with a cod Livery Company (the Worshipful Company of Bell Founders and Organ Grinders) and taking in the Metropolitan Police, the Monarchy, the Civil Service and much else on the way. Despite the childish premise, this very tall tale is beautifully visualized, and as with all the best fantasy, the internal logic is flawless. This allows the tale to grow taller. How do you disguise a fugitive elephant? Pass it off as a butterfly! And if you want to know how to do that, read the book.

The trouble with being Swedish is that no one (in the UK at any rate) takes you seriously. Bjorn Borg, Abba, Dag Hammarskjöld, the Muppet chef – despite their various and acknowledged talents, we have never approached them with the solemnity they command elsewhere. Even the Ing. Bergmans (-rid and -mar) seem condemned to share one reputation. August Strindberg, with his uncritical devotion to Nietzsche, his misogyny, his antisemitism and the diary in which he recorded the occasions when he "possessed" his wives (even when they were living apart) is an obvious butt for low comedy. In **Augustus Rex**, (Penguin, £5.99) Clive Sinclair sets about it.

The tale is told from the viewpoint of Beelzebub, on this occasion a slightly camp version of Screwtape, who offers the dying playwright a Faustian bargain, resurrecting him under a false name in 1961. To represent convincingly the agonies of a paranoid genius struggling with a suddenly rejuvenated body, the bloodiest half century yet recorded and the discomfiture of all his prejudices is no small challenge. Sinclair does not attempt it; instead he resurrects that tired staple of European farce, the man whose insane fear of being cuckolded drives his wife into the arms of a rival whom she would not otherwise have considered. But instead of introducing the rival (who only appears in the last chapter) he proceeds to make hay with another easy target – Freudian analysis. Then he gives his hero the Philosophers' Stone, so that he can make gold and be corrupted successively by unearned wealth and equally unearned adulation.

The theological framework is that of a prolonged and extremely inept Temptation, but the story is essentially pointless – the individual scenes generally work, but they never gel. Sinclair is a small man, trifling with the weaknesses of a great one; that he

does so through the medium of the Father of Lies allows the Unreliable Witness to be invoked, but fails to redeem the book, Beelzebub being remarkable only for his smugness. Shaw remarked that he would like to dig up Shakespeare's body and throw stones at him. Reading *Augustus Rex* is a bit like being forced to watch him do it.

**The Imaginary Monkey** by Sean French (Granta, £12.99) comes in two parts. The first is a hyper-realistic, mildly pornographic and rather dreary account of the amour of Greg and Susan, two people of less than average savvy, beauty and élan. As they are drawn to each other less by desire than an existential fear of having no one, so their cohabitation is sustained less by affection and respect than by the need to be recognized in the world at large as at least minimally bedworthy, and by their own acceptance of very moderate expectations. After two years Susan lands a more attractive lover, and Greg gets drunk.

He awakes to find himself transformed into a small monkey, a role offering better possibilities than that of large dung beetle, but which he lacks the imagination to exploit; he scampers off to Susan's new home, where he has little trouble getting adopted as a pet (and named Greg, after himself). By day he practises his monkey routines, by night, to punish Susan's infidelity, he engineers small domestic disasters, and writes the book. Ultimately he reads Susan's diaries (something he had never managed to do during their human relationship) which purges his bile. Susan becomes pregnant. End of book.

As a novel it's deeply unsatisfactory. The observation is pinpoint sharp, the expression is witty, but neither can compensate for the yawning absence of purpose. One might as well read the novelization of a random segment from a daytime soap. The usual justification for this sort of thing is that "it's how real people live," with the implication that those who by choice or circumstance find their lives touched by drama, passion or heroism are (like those who display style, talent or genius) in some way less "real" than the ruck. It's a point of view, of course; and those who hold it may find the paraphernalia of magic realism afford necessary support.

(Chris Gilmore)



# Wacky Quests and Revelations

Pete Crowther

There must have been a moment – perhaps even several – during the writing of *Gone South* (Michael Joseph, £15.99 & £9.99), when its author, Robert McCammon, wondered whether the novel was actually going to work. Because, let's face it: it's certainly wacky.

It concerns a quest, of sorts.

Dan Lambert, suffering what is probably the early tertiary stage of a leukaemia left to him by the deadly fallout of Agent Orange, is separated from his wife and son and trying to make ends meet in the recession. With characteristically impeccable timing, Dan's bank calls to re-possess his truck, his only means of making any living at all. He goes down to the bank to try to reason with them only to find that there's no sentiment in business. A row ensues and, in an attempt to get Dan out of his office, the bank manager calls the security guard; tempers are lost, a gun is drawn and the scuffle ends in death. Dan Lambert, now a fugitive, sets off for the sanctuary of the Louisiana bayous.

Invited to track him down for a sizeable reward are two unusual bounty hunters: a man with the additional head and arm of his undeveloped twin brother growing out of his torso, and an Elvis Presley impersonator.

En route, Dan comes across Arden Halliday, a young woman on a quest of her own: namely to find the fabled Bright Girl, whose touch, she hopes, will rid her of her own burden – a disfiguring birthmark that blankets half of her face.

What follows is a story which is virtually impossible to categorize. By turns uplifting and exciting, *Gone South* maintains 100% entertainment until the final page is ended. Like the magnificent *Boy's Life* – now available as a paperback from Penguin Books, priced £4.99 – which preceded it, *Gone South* is actually a parable, a tale of beliefs, convictions and human emotions, with a resolution that is both credible and optimistic... McCammon's stock in trade.

"...and he told me stories about the Bright Girl. How she could touch my birthmark and take it away. He told me where he'd grown up, and how everybody down there knew about the Bright Girl." She paused again, her eyes narrowing as she viewed some distant scene inside her head. "Those stories...they were so real. So full of light and hope. That's what I need right now."

Don't we all.

If Robert McCammon deals in light and hope, then it's probably fair to say that the great veteran spooksmith Charles L. Grant deals in twilight and uncertainty. His 1982 novel *The Nestling* demonstrated a fine story-telling power, an ability he was to take through to later novels – albeit to occasionally markedly lesser extents – plus the *Shadows* and *Greystone Bay* anthology series and, of course, his own excellent short stories, frequently among the best in the field. It's because of this that his new book, *Raven* (NEL, £14.99), is so disappointing. Because, while fitting perfectly into his oeuvre, it's altogether too slight.

*Raven* tells the story of a group of individuals trapped in a diner by an eerie stranger who occupies the distant trees, watching the diner and failing to leave tracks in the snow. Eventually, the occupants – having remarked at the fact that there seems to be no traffic on the road – try to leave... with the result that one of them is shot. They return to their "prison," where tempers and personalities flare and crash, while, outside, the storm worsens. Eventually, further attempts to leave must be made.

The isolation theme of the story has, of course, been explored before, but usually only as a complementary backdrop: Stephen King's "The Mist," for example, had a group of people trapped in a supermarket; while, in issues six and seven of DC Comics' *The Sandman* ("24 Hours" and "Sound And Fury"), Neil Gaiman also trapped his characters in a diner. There are others. The point of the technique is presumably to build tension and put personalities under pressure so that, eventually, they blow. In *Raven*, however, the imprisonment is more fundamental and the characters merely seethe, talk and think.

The most original element – aside from the fact that, as in King's *Dolores Claiborne*, there are no chapter breaks – is the apparent metaphysical link between the stranger and one of the people trapped in the diner, and the related significance of an early sighting of a raven. But while, to his credit, Grant pulls out all the stops and builds this well, we never learn exactly what the connection is – if, indeed, there is one at all.

Re-worked as a short story, with a less obtuse and overtly stylistic approach, this could make it. As a novel, it falls far short of the energy or substance required to carry it across the finishing line.

Energy is something Bentley Little is not short of, and his debut novel, *The Revelation* (Headline, £15.99), is so full of substance it should come with a handle to make carrying it easier.

Little has already made something

of a reputation for himself with a stream of baroque short stories which have appeared in the likes of Tom Monteleone's *Borderlands* anthology series and many small-press American magazines. But, wisely – particularly in view of my comments on Grant's *Raven* – Little went for a more traditionally accessible narrative to progress this full-length story of good versus evil, and the decision netted him the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel of its year (1989).

Remembering all that Stephen King taught us (and, so some would say, has since forgotten!) about how to tell a story, Little invites us into the small Arizona town of Randall where the usual "strange things" seem to be happening.

For a starter, someone butchers several herds of goats and daubs the local church with their blood; a senile old woman becomes pregnant and then, without warning, delivers a hideously deformed still-born foetus which, when everyone's backs are turned, comes to life and apparently walks away; the local minister and his family disappear; and, when he takes his pregnant wife for a medical check-up in nearby Phoenix, one of the townsfolk encounters a bizarre preacherman who offers help:

"I don't need any help," Gordon said. He turned back to his insurance forms.

"Yes you do. Your wife is going to have a baby. And there will be troubles."

This, of course, turns out to be an understatement of mammoth proportions.

*The Revelation* is a remarkably well-worked and enjoyable book which, while borrowing at least the sentiments of such earlier works as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* and every small-town disaster/horror novel since *Salem's Lot*, has its own confident and distinctive voice. Manipulative as hell, Little builds horror upon horror as he moves like an express train to the climactic confrontation.

Absolutely first rate and highly recommended. Headline promises more... watch the racks!

Christopher Fowler's version of modern day London – an eerily Ealing-flavoured capital which occasionally verges dangerously close to fog-shrouded cobbled streets, lavender sellers and cries of "Gor blimey, Guv" – generally works surprisingly and endearingly well...in much the same way as Ramsey Campbell's Liverpool fits his own bleak suburban epics.

But in his latest, *Darkest Day* (Little, Brown, £10.99), Fowler's setting seems to be so stylized that it resembles an uneasy hybrid of a Dennis Wheatley novel and the "Blackfriars



Phantom" text serial which ran in *Radio Fun* comic in the 1950s. And there's the rub: it comes across as being quite juvenile in all departments – plot progression, characterization and dialogue, all of which are, in the main, stereotypical and somewhat two- or even one-dimensional.

*Darkest Day* concerns, primarily, a young woman who's afraid of the dark, a bizarre Victorian occult society, a string of unusual deaths – many of which could easily have been included in *Young Sherlock Holmes* or an episode of *The Avengers* television show – a well-heeled but pseudo-aristocratic family of gargantuan objectionability, and a pair of detectives who resemble a cross between Hergé's Thompson twins and Rathbone's and Bruce's Holmes and Watson. In fact, archetypes abound here and it's undoubtedly as a result of Fowler's strong links to the movie industry that it's so easy to put famous actor-faces to his characters.

Art fraud, exotic executions – including a man who literally explodes on a tube train – computer jiggery-pokery, government hi-jinks, an ice cream van that steals its customers, voodoo, tigers, Gilbert and Sullivan (!), a machine that could have come straight from an old Jules Verne or H.G. Wells story, a new slant on Christmas and a welter of rotten assassins all combine to produce a literary helter skelter of B-movie proportions.

In a style that's sometimes jokingly melodramatic and only occasionally black, *Darkest Day* nevertheless delivers Fowler's rather predictable brand of horror with panache. Which is more than can be said for many, for it is quite a tale and one which is engagingly told – but one cannot help but wonder how much better it would have been if it had come in a good bit shorter than its current 570 pages.

If you're not acquainted with his work and fancy giving him a try – and he is well worth the effort – then read the excellent *Roofworld* or *Rune*, or even one of his three short-story collections. His latest, **Sharper Knives** (Warner, £8.99), contains some of the best titles this side of Harlan Ellison in his prime – witness: "Black Day at Bad Rock," "The Legend of Dracula Reconsidered as a Prime-Time TV Special," "Norman Wisdom and the Angel of Death," "Persia" and "The Vintage Car Table-Mat Collection of the Living Dead." Hard to resist...but don't expect much in the way of happy endings.

(Pete Crowther)

## British Magazine Reviews

### John Duffield

It is with sorrow and a sense of loss that I write this: Trevor Jones, publisher of *New Moon*, died at the end of February 1993 after a long illness. You'll perhaps be aware that I was an assistant editor for the magazine before its publication was halted last year. All that time and longer Trevor was a man who silently shouldered his burdens. When he couldn't come to the phone it was because he was on his back. When he couldn't come to the London pub evenings it was because he was on dialysis. You wouldn't have known it. With his brother Roger he produced 37 issues of *New Moon* and its *Dream* incarnation over seven years. It was always my favourite, full of the wonder that, I don't know, nurtures the creativity that is the meaning of life. Now he's dead and he won't be able to watch his daughter growing up, and his wife will miss him so so much. Thank you, Trevor, for what you gave.

**Dementia 13** is now spreading out from its horror origins to offer fantasy, and I hear tell, some science fiction in future. Issue 10 is A4 and typeset, with a red & black card cover and a layout that's only let down by some poor illustrations. It gives seven stories for £1.75, an interview with Ramsey Campbell, letters, a couple of articles, a history of *Peeping Tom* magazine, and a magazine list.

It starts off with a story by Julie Akhurst called "Received with Thanks," about a girl in a flat who meets an actor who does the dirty on his girlfriend by selling her soul in return for fame, fortune and Hollywood. It was credible, and believable. "Bobtail" by D.F. Lewis was however rather typical of his prose-poem style, and did nothing for me. Moving on quickly, I enjoyed "A Fisherman's Tale" by William Smith, where a guy walks into a pub and it all goes quiet. It transpires there's this local lake that's reputedly bottomless, harbouring a monster fishie, and the newcomer has come to catch it. The story is light-hearted, with a different ending that brought a smile.

"The Children of Avalon" by Mark Samuels was a little like *Day of the Triffids* in that everybody looks up at the cosmic radiation, only instead of being blinded they end up turning into immortal slime mould. Nice storyline, but the execution and resolution weren't so hot. "Weird" by Stuart Hughes was slow and had some logic problems, but with some nice imagery: *All the skin was a pale, greying colour, with darkening tinges of bruised dark*

blue. It was about a guy having a hang-over and a half, any more would let the cat out of the bag.

"Prey" by Steve Green was a shortie with a punchline ending that was spoiled by a give-away illustration. Paull Pinn's "The Huntress" was a too obscure short-short that only reminded me of *The Hunger* with D. Bowie and C. Deneuve. Toting up, I found I definitely liked two of the seven stories, thought three were OK, and disliked two. All in all, the mag isn't quite my cup of tea, but is adequately readable and varied.

*Dementia 13*, an illustrated journal of the Arcane and Macabre. 54 A4 pages, £1.75 per issue or £7.50 for a four-quarter sub. Available from and cheques payable to Pam Creais, at 17 Pinewood Avenue, Sidcup, Kent, DA15 8BB.

**Strange Attractor** seems to be finding its feet. Issue 3 is nicely presented, with nary a typo in sight. No illustrations either, but nevermind. It's still A5, with a two-colour shiny cover, weighing in at 54 pages and eight stories. There's again perhaps an overly horrific tone but what really gives it lift-off is the humour.

"Baby Boom" by Jim Steel is absolutely gross, all about babies and a pitchfork, said implement propelling said babies into the incinerator, of course. Until, that is, a knowing telepathic newborn comes slipping down the chute trailing his umbilicus. Jim Steel has his tongue so far in cheek it's positively wagging out of his ear. I just had to laugh. Another droll story is one called "The Ponk" about a dude who is suffering from intermittently blocked drains, and premonitions of drowning when he sees his wan reflection in the grey-brown fetid water. The fun turned cold at the end though, with a genuinely chilling surprise. It was written by John Duffield. Must be some relation.

Then there was "Old Croak" by Richard Williams, about a pushy brat schoolkid who breaks into the high-walled manor house, scene of hushed whispers and dubious goings on. The suspense is delicious, and of course young Archie finds his just desserts in the end when he meets the family. "Her Ghosts" by P.J.L. Hinder was thoughtful, a post-apocalyptic run-down future where reality is fraying at the edges and people are leaking back in. The style was unconventional here, but didn't mar the delivery. "The People Upstairs" by David Logan was likeable and upbeat, about a dining club featuring for example the one-armed rugby player who gave himself a knuckle sandwich. Grotesque maybe, but the humour makes it palatable, ho ho.

There's other stuff that was a waste of space, fiction that doesn't go any-



where or even enjoy the journey. Plus there's some pallid poetry from guys like Steve Sneyd and the award-winning Bruce Boston. Wince. But never-mind, overall *Strange Attractor* has a fair old hit rate. It's fun.

*Strange Attractor: Horror, Fantasy, & Slipstream* (I gather Slipstream is f&sf with the ray guns and magic swords tidied away). 54 A5 pages, £2.00 per issue or £7.75 for a four-quarterly subscription. Available from and cheques payable to Strange Attractor, c/o Rick Cadger, 111 Sundon Road, Houghton Regis, Beds, LU5 5NL.

**A**h. It looks as if I've come to the bottom of the barrel now. All I can scrape up is stuff like *Territories*. Hmmn. Naw, forget it. Instead, in closing, I'd just like to mention *Cassandra*. This isn't a magazine, but instead is a little writers' club where you pay £7.50 per annum for a monthly newsletter plus the faint chance of rubbing shoulders with people like Terry Pratchett. It gives timely info on magazines and other outlets, offers workshopping opportunities both postal or physical, and seems to be a good launching ground judging from the past and present members. If you're interested in writing, this will be money well spent. Cheques payable to Cassandra, c/o Martyn Taylor, at 14 Natal Road, Cambridge.

(John Duffield)

## UK Books Received March 1993

*The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.*

Adams, Nicholas. **Hard Rock**. "Horror High, 1." Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-822-1, 156pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991; it's copyrighted by "Daniel Weiss Associates, Inc.," presumably a packaging company.) 25th March 1993.

Adams, Nicholas. **Sudden Death**. "Horror High, 2." Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-827-2, 151pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 25th March 1993.

Aldiss, Brian. **Non-Stop**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017353-6, 269pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1958; about lost tribes aboard a generation starship, this was Aldiss's first sf novel.) 25th March 1993.

Andrews, Virginia. **Midnight Whispers**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71811-8, 440pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Romantic horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; this is "the fourth novel in the brilliant new series which opened with *Dawn*";

as to the true authorship, it's interesting that the publishers now feel the need to put a disclaimer on the front cover: "Since Virginia's death, we have worked with a carefully selected writer to organize and complete Virginia's stories and to create additional novels, of which this is one, inspired by her storytelling genius.") 25th March 1993.

Anthony, Piers. **Demons Don't Dream**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-58150-0, 344pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's described on the jacket flap as "the sixteenth chronicle of the enchanted kingdom of Xanth.") 25th March 1993.

Anthony, Piers. **Isle of View**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-57113-0, 344pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; another "magic of Xanth" novel.) 25th March 1993.

Avallone, Michael. **The Man from U.N.C.L.E.** Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-877-9, 155pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf/thriller TV novelization, first published in the USA, 1965; first in the long-running "U.N.C.L.E." series of spoof spy yarns; the author is perhaps best known for his crime fiction, but also has written dozens of movie novelizations including one of the *Planet of the Apes* books.) 29th April 1993.

Banks, Iain. **The Crow Road**. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10323-2, 501pp, paperback, £6.99. (Non-sf novel by a well-known sf writer, first published in 1992.) 22nd April 1993.

Bloom, Clive. **Creepers: British Horror and Fantasy in the Twentieth Century**. Pluto Press, ISBN 0-7453-0665-9, xii+190pp, paperback, £9.95. (Anthology of critical essays, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; subjects covered by the mainly academic contributors include "Empire Gothic," William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, M.R. James, Daphne du Maurier, Dennis Wheatley, C.S. Lewis, James Herbert, Angela Carter, Clive Barker and a few others; the essays are variable, but most have the characteristic virtues and failings of much recent academic writing on popular fiction; curiously, for a book on British horror, the quintessential English master of the genre, Ramsey Campbell, gets just one passing mention – and his name is mis-spelled.) Late entry: February publication, received in March 1993.

Brooks, Terry. **The Elf Queen of Shannara**. "Book Three of The Heritage of Shannara." Legend, ISBN 0-09-920131-3, 403pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 18th March 1993.

Brooks, Terry. **The Talismans of Shannara**. "Book Four of The Heritage of Shannara." Legend, ISBN 0-09-926231-2, 453pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 18th March 1993.

Carroll, Jonathan. **After Silence**. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10347-X, 240pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; fifth in the "Answered Prayers Quintet" [the series title is John Clute's coinage]; reviewed by Clute in *Interzone* 61.) 22nd April 1993.

Clute, John, and Peter Nicholls, eds. **The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**. [2nd edition.] Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-124-4, xxxvi+1370pp, hardcover, £45. (Sf encyclopedia; the first edition, under the general editorship of Peter Nicholls, was published by Granada in 1979; so here it is a last – the book we've been awaiting for more than a decade; an astonishing 1.3 million words in length [almost twice the size of the first edition], it contains no illustrations, just 1,400 pages of double-column small print

crammed with reliable information about the field; every author, editor, magazine, anthology series and sf movie you can think of has an entry herein; perhaps even more valuable, though, are the countless "theme" and "terminology" entries, collectively adding up to an entire history and commentary on the genre; this is the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of our field, an indispensable work; the vast bulk of it has been written by Messrs Clute and Nicholls themselves, with considerable help from contributing editor Brian Stableford: they are to be congratulated on a mammoth labour and a brilliant result; if necessary, go and sell a few dozen old paperbacks in order to buy this book, but buy it you must.) 8th April 1993.

Cooper, Louise. **Aisling: Book 8 of Indigo**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21444-5, 340pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; last in the "Indigo" series?) 13th April 1993.

Daniel, Tony. **Warpath**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-076-X, 295pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £8.99; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 71.) 8th April 1993.

Darvill-Evans, Peter. **Deceit**. "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20387-9, 325pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; the author is also the editor of this series of spinoff novels, and he includes an eight-page afterword explaining the philosophy of the latest "Doctor Who" publishing enterprise.) 15th April 1993.

Dickson, Gordon R. **The Dragon on the Border**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21328-7, 393pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; third in the "Dragon Knight" series.) 26th April 1993.

Eisenstein, Phyllis. **In the Red Lord's Reach**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21761-4, 282pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989; the second book about Alaric the Minstrel.) 29th March 1993.

Eldredge, Niles. **The Miner's Canary: Unravelling the Mysteries of Extinction**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-86369-675-9, xviii+250pp, paperback, £6.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1991.) 18th March 1993.

Foster, Alan Dean. **Codgerspace**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-035-3, 309pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 22nd April 1993.

Fowler, Christopher. **Red Bride**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0159-X, 424pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 22nd April 1993.

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Reunion**. "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-71682-4, 343pp, paperback, £4.50. (Shared-universe sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 25th March 1993.

Galford, Ellen. **The Dyke and the Dybbuk**. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-449-0, 248pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy [?] novel, first edition; this is a fourth novel by an American writer who lives Scotland; her earlier books include such titles as *Moll Cutpurse: Her True History* [1984] and *Queendom Come* [1990]; this one, according to the blurb, draws on "the rich store of fantasy, humour and occult lore from the almost-lost world of Eastern European Jewry.") 15th April 1993.

Gemmell, David A. **Morningstar**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-922891-2, 282pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 60.) 1st April 1993.



Gladwish, Roderick. **To Stop a War**. Pentland Press [1 Hutton Close, South Church, Bishop Auckland, Durham DL14 6XB], ISBN 1-85821-019-4, 204pp, hardcover, £13.50. (Sf novel, first edition; the author is British [born 1967] and this is presumably his debut book.) 5th April 1993.

Haining, Peter, ed. **Vampires at Midnight: Seventeen Brilliant and Chilling Tales of the Ghastly Bloodsucking Undead**. Foreword by Christopher Lee. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0146-8, 255pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first published as *The Midnight People*, 1968; this resurrected volume contains a fairly standard selection of fiction by Bloch, Bradbury, M.R. James, Leiber, Matheson, Polidori, Stoker, Manly Wade Wellman and others.) 8th April 1993.

Harrison, Harry. **Stainless Steel Visions**. Legend, ISBN 0-09-926021-2, 254pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1993; it contains 13 stories old ["The Streets of Ashkelon"] and new ["The Golden Years of the Stainless Steel Rat"].) April 1993?

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Cart and Cwiddar**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7497-1252-X, 214pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1975; first in the "Dalemark" series.) March 1993.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **The Crown of Dalemark**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7497-1255-4, 493pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of the "Dalemark" quartet.) March 1993.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Drowned Ammet**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7497-1253-8, 312pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1977; second in the "Dalemark" series.) March 1993.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **The Spellcoats**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7497-1254-6, 279pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in 1979; third in the "Dalemark" series.) March 1993.

Joyce, Graham. **Dark Sister**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4029-9, 372pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 15th April 1993.

Kelman, Judith. **Prime Evil**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-1207-6, 263pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 25th March 1993.

Kingdon, Jonathan. **Self-Made Man and His Undoing**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71140-7, xiii+369pp, hardcover, £20. (Popular science text, first edition; by a Tanzanian-born British biologist, this is a dense and stimulating book on human origins; it is illustrated throughout by the author; unlike other recent works of similar scope [such as Jared Diamond's easier-reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*, reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 63], it concentrates mainly on our "self-made" variegation since the emergence of the first fully-modern human beings, circa 200,000 years ago, and adds up to a provocative study of that vexed subject known as "race"; a sometimes demanding but always impressive work, recommended.) 25th March 1993.

Koontz, Dean. **The Door to December**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3705-0, 472pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA under the pseudonym of "Leigh Nicholls," 1985.) 15th April 1993.

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Paradise War: Song of Albion, Book One**. Lion, ISBN 0-7459-2466-2, 407pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 50.) 26th March 1993.

Laws, Stephen. **Darkfall**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-58173-X, 358pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 8th April 1993.

Laws, Stephen. **Gideon**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-56394-4, 342pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 8th April 1993.

Lee, Tanith. **Elephantasm**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0758-5, 314pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 6th May 1993.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **Earthsea Revisioned**. Green Bay Publications [72 Water Lane, Histon, Cambridge CB4 4LR], ISBN 0-948845-03-1, 28pp, paperbound, £4.95. (Essay by a major sf/fantasy writer, first edition; it's described on the title page as: "A lecture delivered under the title *Children, Women, Men and Dragons at Worlds Apart*, an institute sponsored by Children's Literature New England and held from August 2 to 8, 1992 at Keble College, Oxford University, England.") 5th April 1993.

Lindholm, Megan. **Alien Earth**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21516-6, 385pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; the author is known for her fantasy, but this is described as "her first science fiction novel.") 13th April 1993.

Little, Bentley. **The Revelation**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0822-0, 313pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989; proof copy received; this book won the Bram Stoker Award as best first novel of its year.) 6th May 1993.

Lumley, Brian. **Elysia: The Coming of Cthulhu!** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21468-2, 237pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1989; the blurb informs us that this the concluding volume of not one but three Lumley series: "Titus Crow," "Dreamlands" and "Primal Land.") 29th March 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Crystal Line**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02876-7, 271pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1992; sequel to *The Crystal Singer* and *Killashandra*.) 22nd April 1993.

McCammon, Robert. **Boy's Life**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-015998-3, 538pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the author's acknowledgments include tributes to "Mr Rod Serling" and "Mr Ray Bradbury.") 25th March 1993.

McCrone, John. **The Myth of Irrationality: The Science of the Mind from Plato to Star Trek**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-57284-X, xii+340pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Popular science text, first edition; this new work by the author of *The Ape That Spoke* endeavours to counter the long-held notion that human beings are fundamentally irrational; there are passing references to science fiction throughout, though in truth *Star Trek* doesn't have much to do with the subject in hand; an interesting read.) 23rd April 1993.

Maitland, Sara. **Women Fly When Men Aren't Watching: Short Stories**. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-559-4, 191pp, paperback, £5.99. (Mainstream/fantasy collection, first edition; some of these wide-ranging literary and feminist tales first appeared in magazines such as *Bananas* and *Time Out* and in anthologies such as Richard Dalby's *Virago Book of Ghost Stories* and Alice Fell's *The Seven Deadly Sins*.) 15th April 1993.

May, Julian. **Blood Trillium**. Grafton, ISBN 0-246-13761-4, 336pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to *Black Trillium*; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 64.) 22nd April 1993.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Dancers at the End of Time**. "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 7." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-035-2, 538pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition in this form [which is specified as revised]; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition priced at £10.99; it contains: *An Alien Heat* [1972], *The Hollow Lands* [1974] and *The End of All Songs* [1976] plus a short preface by the author; these three novels have previously appeared in an omnibus edition from Grafton Books; one of Moorcock's best works, recommended.) 8th April 1993.

Moorcock, Michael. **Gloriana; or, The Unfulfill'd Queen**. Phoenix, ISBN 1-85799-041-2, 368pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1978; a new author's note states: "This edition is significantly revised from all previous English language editions"; one of Moorcock's major works, highly recommended.) 1st April 1993.

Naylor, Grant. **Primordial Soup: Red Dwarf Scripts**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-017886-4, vii+151pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous sf television scripts, first edition; "Grant Naylor" is a pseudonym for Rob Grant and Doug Naylor, who are trying very very hard to be the next Douglas Adams – with some degree of success, it would seem, as videotapes of their programmes have now sold quarter of a million copies.) 25th March 1993.

Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle. **The Moat Around Murchison's Eye**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224165-X, 402pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; sequel to *The Mote in God's Eye*, "eighteen years in the making"; and, yes, the different spellings of "Moat/Mote" are correct.) 5th April 1993.

Nodier, Charles. **Smarra & Trilby**. Translated by Judith Landry. Introduction by John Clute. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-79-0, 125pp, paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; these two short novels, described by Clute as "sleek and flowing and highly unsafe," were published originally in France, 1821-22; apparently, this is their first appearance in English.) 15th April 1993.

Norton, Andre, and Mercedes Lackey. **The Elvenbane: An Epic High Fantasy of the Halfblood Chronicles**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21687-1, 575pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 54.) 26th April 1993.

Peary, Danny. **Alternate Oscars: One Critic's Defiant Choices for Best Picture, Actor, and Actress – From 1927 to the Present**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-71239-X, 325pp, trade paperback, £12.99. (Film criticism, first published in the USA, 1993; what is the relevance of this book to *Interzone*? – well, it turns out that Peary is an sf/fantasy/horror movie buff, and many of his choices of films which ought to have won an Oscar belong more or less to our genres; for example, he thinks that in 1933 King Kong should have won instead of *Cavalcade*; in 1939, *The Wizard of Oz* instead of *Gone With the Wind*; in 1946, *It's a Wonderful Life* instead of *The Best Years of Our Lives*; in 1955, *The Night of the Hunter* instead of *Marty*; in 1960, *Psycho* instead of *The Apartment*; in 1964, *Dr Strangelove* instead of *My Fair Lady*; in 1965, *Repulsion* instead of *The Sound of Music*; in 1968, 2001: *A Space Odyssey* instead of *Oliver!*; in 1982, *E.T.* instead of *Gandhi*; in 1985, *Brazil* instead of *Out of Africa*; on a tangential note, of interest to Ballard fans, he even thinks that in 1987 Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* should have won instead of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*; who are we to



disagree with him? — Peary also writes intelligently about all the films, actors and actresses he discusses, and of course he gives laurels to all those lovely people, from Cary Grant to Marilyn Monroe, who never actually got within smelling distance of an Academy Award; an enjoyable book, recommended.) 25th March 1993.

Pike, Christopher. **Bury Me Deep**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-58268-5, 189pp, paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 18th March 1993.

Rawn, Melanie. **The Dragon Token: Dragon Star, Book Two**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32897-2, xii+574pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 61.) 8th April 1993.

Rawn, Melanie. **Stronghold: Dragon Star, Book One**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32633-3, 588pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 60.) 8th April 1993.

Richardson, Michael, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Surrealism (The Identity of Things)**. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-45-3, 277pp, paperback, £8.99. (Anthology of surrealist tales and other prose pieces, first edition; authors represented include Louis Aragon, Andre Breton, Luis Buñuel, Roger Caillois, Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Robert Desnos, Octavio Paz and Raymond Queneau among many others; most of the pieces are brief, and are here translated into English for the first time; recommended for the adventurous.) 15th April 1993.

Shaw, Bob. **How to Write Science Fiction**. Allison & Busby, ISBN 0-7490-0135-6, 158pp, paperback, £6.99. (Sf writers' "how-to" book, first edition; an extract appeared in *Interzone* 67; originally announced for January 1993, this book's appearance was delayed by three months due to the takeover of the publishing house: Allison & Busby is now a subsidiary of Wilson & Day Ltd.) 22nd March 1993.

Shaw, Bob. **Killer Planet**. Pan/Piper, ISBN 0-330-31696-6, 105pp, paperback, £2.99. (Juvenile sf novel, first published in 1989.) 8th April 1993.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Murasaki: A Novel in Six Parts**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21445-3, xi+290pp, paperback, £5.99. (Round-robin sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; the contributing authors are Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, David Brin, Nancy Kress and Frederik Pohl; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 61.) 29th March 1993.

Smith, Guy N. **The Knighton Vampires**. Piaktus, ISBN 0-7499-0180-2, 183pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) 29th April 1993.

Stableford, Brian. **Sexual Chemistry: Sardoniac Tales of the Genetic Revolution**. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-71559-3, 374pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in 1991; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 50; Pocket Books [UK] is a new paperback subsidiary of Simon & Schuster [UK], who first published this book in hardcover.) 22nd April 1993.

Taylor, Roger. **Farnor**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3999-1, 566pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; apparently, although we only learn this in a note at the end, it's the first half of a two-part work called *Nightfall*; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 70.) 15th April 1993.

Taylor, Roger. **Valderen: Part Two of Night-**

**fall**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0748-8, 343pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 1st April 1993.

Tepper, Sheri S. **Sideshow**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223949-3, 467pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 59.) 22nd April 1993.

Tine, Robert. **Forever Young**. "Based on the screenplay by Jeffrey Abrams." Penguin/Signet, ISBN 0-45-117779-7, 172pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie novelization, first published in the USA, 1992; basically an old-fashioned timeslip romance, it's the book of the recent Mel Gibson film directed by Steve Miner; author Robert Tine also wrote the novelization of the sf movie *Universal Soldier*, among many others.) 25th March 1993.

Tracy, Ann. **Winter Hunger**. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-555-1, 165pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror [?] novel, first published in Canada, 1990; this is a first novel by the author of a non-fiction book called *Patterns of Fear in the Gothic Novel* [1980]; it concerns the Indian myth of the "Windigo," and the blurb describes it as a "Gothic tale"; Margaret Atwood commends it.) 15th April 1993.

Vidal, Gore. **Duluth**. Introduction by the author. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10362-3, x+307pp, paperback, £5.99. (Satirical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; the elegant, if somewhat egotistical, new introduction which accompanies this edition also appears in the three other reprinted novels itemized below.) 22nd April 1993.

Vidal, Gore. **Kalki**. Introduction by the author. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10363-1, x+310pp, paperback, £5.99. (Satirical sf novel, first published in the USA, 1978; the blurb describes the book as a "metaphysical thriller"; like Vidal's other ventures into sf/fantasy, all now reprinted by Abacus in one uniform package, it's essentially unclassifiable.) 22nd April 1993.

Vidal, Gore. **Messiah**. Introduction by the author. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10364-X, x+244pp, paperback, £5.99. (Satirical sf novel, first published in the USA, 1954; this reprint follows the revised text of the 1965 edition; Vidal's earliest attempt at sf/fantasy, recommended.) 22nd April 1993.

Vidal, Gore. **Myra Breckinridge & Myron**. Introduction by the author. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10365-8, viii+440pp, paperback, £6.99. (Satirical fantasy omnibus, first published in the USA, 1986; the individual novels were originally published in 1968 and 1974; among the ultimate "Hollywood fictions," about a world where celluloid fantasies and everyday reality penetrate each other [much like our own world, in fact], these are two of Vidal's best-known and most irreverent works.) 22nd April 1993.

Whittington, Harry. **The Man from U.N.C.L.E.: The Doomsday Affair**. Boxtree, ISBN 1-85283-882-5, 155pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf/thriller TV novelization, first published in the USA, 1965; second in the "U.N.C.L.E." series; the author was perhaps best known for his westerns and historical novels, but also wrote many movie novelizations in various genres.) 29th April 1993.

Williams, Tad. **To Green Angel Tower**. "The final volume of Memory, Sorrow and Thorn." Legend, ISBN 0-09-926221-5, xix+1083pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; at well over a thousand pages, this is a very big book by an American author now resident in Britain.) 1st April 1993.

Wilson, F. Paul. **Sister Night**. New English

Library, ISBN 0-450-57618-3, 314pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA as *Sibs*, 1991.) 18th March 1993.

Wright, Glover. **Shadow of Babel**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-59184-4, 325pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Near-future thriller, first edition; proof copy received; it's by a British author who has been praised by Jack Higgins and others; according to the blurb, "deep beneath the Mojave desert is a project abandoned by the old Soviet Union—a project named BABEL, which threatens the world order, and history itself.") 9th July 1993.

Wylie, Jonathan. **Dark Fire: Island and Empire, Book One**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13978-5, 333pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Jonathan Wylie" is a pseudonym for Mark and Julia Smith.) 22nd April 1993.

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## Overseas Books Received

Anderson, Poul. **Harvest of Stars**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85277-0, 395pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; "classic science fiction at its finest," raves the blurb, "a towering achievement from one of the field's most powerful writers.") August 1993.

Bukatman, Scott. **Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction**. Duke University Press, ISBN 0-8223-1340-5, xiii+396pp, hardcover & trade paperback, \$57.95 & \$18.95. (Critical study of contemporary sf, first edition; proof copy received; despite its academic "postmodernist" name-dropping — Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Donna Haraway are the gods who rule this sealed microcosm — it looks to be a very interesting book, with sections on J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick, William Burroughs, David Cronenberg, William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, graphic novels, computer games, sf movies, etc, etc; there are also welcome mentions of such older prophets of the postmodern as Bernard Wolfe [*Limbo*] and Marshall McLuhan; recommended to the serious-minded who are in search of a brave new valorization of this thing we call science fiction.) July 1993.

Carver, Jeffrey A. **Dragon Rigger**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85061-1, 474pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's a new book in the author's series about the "Star Rigger Universe.") June 1993.

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Hammer of God**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09557-9, xi+226pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the new Clarke books keep on coming, which is heartening; however, with its short chapters and large print, this one is very slim — it's really only a novella.) 15th June 1993.

Donaldson, Stephen R., ed. **Strange Dreams: Unforgettable Fantasy Stories**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-37103-7, xi+544pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it contains reprinted stories by Michael Bishop, Jorge Luis Borges, Orson Scott Card, C.J. Cherryh, Harlan Ellison, M. John Harrison, Franz Kafka, Garry Kilworth, Rudyard Kipling, R.A. Lafferty, Patricia A. McKillip, Rachel Pollack, Lucius Shepard, Theodore Sturgeon, Sheri S. Tepper, Jack Vance and many others.) 15th June 1993.

Dozois, Gardner, Tina Lee, Stanley Schmidt, Ian Randal Strock and Sheila Williams, eds. **Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-08926-0, viii+264pp, trade paperback, \$8.95. (Collection of essays on the writing



of sf, first published in the USA, 1991; it includes reprinted essays by Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov, Hal Clement, Robert A. Heinlein, Norman Spinrad, Jane Yolen and others; the numerous editors are all on the staff of the magazines *Analog* and *Asimov's*; the market listings [which include mention of *Interzone*] have been updated for this edition.) 23rd March 1993.

Dwiggins, Toni. **Interrupt.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85345-9, 317pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Mystery/technothriller, first edition; a debut novel by a woman writer who "lives on the edge of California's Silicon Valley.") Late entry: 16th February publication, received in March 1993.

James, Peter. **Twilight.** St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-08914-7, 316pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1991; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 56.) 24th March 1993.

Jones, Gwyneth. **White Queen.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85492-7, 316pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1991; proof copy received; co-winner of the James Tiptree Memorial Award; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 56.) June 1993.

Norton, Andre. **Golden Trillium.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-09507-2, 296pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; third in the "Trillium" series, the first volume having been written by Norton, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Julian May together, and the second volume by Julian May solus.) 15th July 1993.

Robeson, Kenneth. **The Whistling Wraith.** "Doc Savage." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-29554-3, 274pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Sf/adventure novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the sixth in a new series of pulp-style adventures written by Will Murray in the style of the late Lester Dent, who was the original user of the house pseudonym "Kenneth Robeson.") 1st June 1993.

Schweitzer, Darrell. **Transients and Other Disquieting Stories.** Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian. W. Paul Ganley: Publisher [PO Box 149, Amherst Branch, Buffalo, NY 14226-0149, USA], ISBN 0-932445-55-1, 191pp, trade paperback, \$8.95 [plus \$1 postage outside USA]. (Fantasy/horror collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) No date shown: March 1993?

Watt-Evans, Lawrence, and Esther M. Friesner. **Split Heirs.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85320-3, 319pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is one punning title which made us chuckle; in part, the blurb states that the book is "a penetrating deconstruction of the subtext of modern 'high' fantasy, deploying carefully chosen genre tropes throughout a nominally-constructed secondary creation in order to provoke in the reader that sense of numinous intertextuality so crucial to the ineffable [cont. on page 842].") Late entry: 16th February publication, received in March 1993.

Weis, Margaret. **Ghost Legion: Star of the Guardians, Volume Four.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-56331-9, 534pp, paperback, \$5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) July 1993.

Wiater, Stanley, ed. **After the Darkness.** Maclay [P.O. Box 16253, Baltimore, MD 21210, USA], ISBN 0-940776-28-6, 241pp, hardcover, \$50. (Horror anthology, first edition; this is a collectors' item, published in a limited edition of 750 signed, slipcased copies; it includes all-original stories by Gary Brandner, Nancy A. Collins, Les Daniels, Ed Gorman, Richard Laymon, Graham Masterton, Thomas F. Monteleone, William F. Nolan, Thomas Tessier, Chet Williamson and others.) No date shown: received in March 1993.

Wisman, Ken. **Weird Family Tales: A Journal of Familial Maledictions.** Earth Prime Productions [PO Box 29127, Parma, OH 44129, USA], no ISBN shown, vi+66pp, paperback, \$3.75. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; this is a small-press debut book by an American writer who has contributed a couple of stories to *Interzone* in the past.) April 1993.

## Mutant Popcorn

Continued from page 43

swerves and swoops ("Inventory says the capsule was a water heater, sir..."). Such ruthless economy has both its rewards and its costs. As by now standard in the contemporary Hollywood timeslipper, any sense of actual history is perfunctorily devalued to a merest sense of period, but it's still refreshing to see one fish-out-of-water timejump movie that resists any kind of judgmental comparison between eras. Forever Young simply has so much dramatic business to get through that it hasn't the time itself to run through most of the dreary gosh-a-machine-that-heats-pie-in-45-seconds or whatever-happened-to-real-lemonade rituals, beyond a few token lessons in how to talk to an answerphone or drink from a modern strawpack.

On the other hand, the lump under the rug where the unwanted questions have been swept gets so enormous by the final scenes that when finally Mel gets together with his true love under sunset filters and swelling music to model their Dick Smith creations together and pop the question postponed these hundred and ten minutes, the sense of ending is seriously undermined by nagging yes-buts. Erm, is he going to pop clogs now, or what? Does he stop ageing once he makes 85? Are these guys trying to fob us off with *closural ambivalence*? Isn't this supposed to be an Airfix movie, seamlessly assembled and accurately painted from standard components and charts? We want questions that linger in the mind about time and mortality, we'll watch some arty lo-budget British hodgepodge bricolated out of haphazard coproduction scraps laboriously scavenged from half around the globe: films where you applaud the ambitions and forgive the execution, rather than the other way about. From Hollywood, we expect those onions chopped fine.

(Nick Lowe)

Back issues of *Interzone* are available at £2.50 each (£2.80 overseas).

## Interzone

Some back-issue highlights:

**No.29:** "Sex Wars" issue; stories by Greg Egan, Karen Joy Fowler, Garry Kilworth, etc.

**No.32:** Richard Calder's debut, 'Mosquito,' plus fiction by Barry Bayley, Ian McDonald

**No.34:** All new writers' issue, illustrated throughout by Ian Miller

**No.36:** Kim Newman's "Original Dr Shade" plus stories by Greg Egan, Simon Ings & others

**No.38:** Brian Aldiss issue, with interview by Colin Greenland, plus Greg Bear, etc.

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**No.43:** "In the Air," Newman & Byrne's first USSA story, plus Langford, Jeapes, etc.

**No.48:** All-star "Aboriginal" swap issue, with Brown, Egan, Griffith, McAuley, etc.

**No.50:** Stephen Baxter, Ian Lee & others, plus full index of first fifty issues

**No.53:** Fiction by Christopher Evans, Ian R. MacLeod; Jonathan Carroll interview

**No.56:** Ian Watson's "Coming of Vertumnus" plus Ballard, Di Filippo, Mapes, Webb, etc.

**No.58:** Our tenth anniversary issue, with Ballard, Storm Constantine, M. John Harrison

**No.60:** Fantasy issue, with Garry Kilworth's "The Sculptor"; Donaldson interview and more

**No.63:** David Garnett, Diane Mapes, Ian Watson; Greenland & Sheckley interviews

**No.66:** Eugene Byrne's "Cyril the Cyberpig" plus Elizabeth Hand, John Sladek, etc.

**No.67:** Bob Shaw issue, with stories by Baxter, Blanchard, Harrison & Ings

**No.70:** Molly Brown, Keith Brooke, Nicola Griffith, Brian Stableford and others

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(Issues 13-73 inclusive; we ran no interviews before issue 13. Interviewers' names are given in brackets after interviewee.)

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